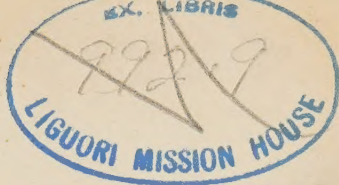


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THE LIFE OF JEANNE
CHARLOTTE DE BRÉCHARD

THE SPIRIT OF SAINT JANE
FRANCES DE CHANTAL AS
SHOWN BY HER LETTERS.

Translated by
THE SISTERS OF THE VISITATION,
Harrow-on-the-Hill.

With a Preface by
HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL BOURNE,
Archbishop of Westminster.

With Portraits. 8vo. 21s. net.

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.
LONDON, NEW YORK, TORONTO,
BOMBAY, CALCUTTA & MADRAS.



LA VÉNÉRABLE MERE Ieanne Charlotte de Brechard,
compagne de la Vénérable Mere de Chantal, troisième
Religieuse de l'ordre de la Visitation S.^{te} Marie, et première
Supérieure du Monastère de Riom en Auvergne, où
elle est décedée en odeur de Sainteté, le 18. Nov.^{bre}
1637. âgée de 57. ans.

THE LIFE OF JEANNE CHARLOTTE DE BRÉCHARD

OF THE ORDER OF THE VISITATION
FRIEND AND SPIRITUAL DAUGHTER OF ST. FRANCIS
DE SALES AND ST. JANE FRANCES DE CHANTAL

1580-1637

BY THE
SISTERS OF THE VISITATION, HARROW

WITH A PREFACE BY
HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL BOURNE
ARCHBISHOP OF WESTMINSTER

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.
39 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON, E.C. 4

NEW YORK, TORONTO
BOMBAY, CALCUTTA, AND MADRAS

1924

Nihil obstat

F. THOMAS BERGH, O.S.B.
Censor deputatus.

Imprimatur

EDM: CAN: SURMONT
Vic. Gen.

*Westmonasterii,
Die 5^a Novembris, 1923.*

In conformity with the Decrees of Pope Urban VIII the compilers of this biography declare that they submit entirely to the judgment of the Holy See everything written therein concerning extraordinary grace vouchsafed to its subject.

Printed in Great Britain.

PREFACE

THE Order of the Visitation founded in 1610 by St. Francis of Sales has ever been a school of solid holiness. St. Jane Frances de Chantal who had to carry into living effect, both in herself and in her religious daughters, the teachings of St. Francis, showed forth the heroism to which souls could be carried by faithful adherence to the rules that he had enjoined. Before the century was over another Sister of the Visitation had been called by God out of her lowliness to be the chosen instrument for the propagation throughout the world of devotion to the Sacred Heart. St. Margaret Mary reached her high estate of a canonised Saint because she was heroically faithful not only to her own special vocation, but, primarily, because she was in the fullest sense a daughter of the Visitation. None, therefore, will be astonished to learn that in the Annals of the Order there is a long line of Sisters, beginning with the first companions of Saint Jane and continuing to the present time, whose history proclaims that they too have found by the same means the path to conspicuous holiness. Some of these may one day receive the honours of the Altar. The vast majority are in accordance with God's usual Providence unknown in death, as they were, except to a very few, in life.

Of the former, Sister Jeanne Charlotte de Brécharde is a striking instance. Associated with St. Jane from the

Preface

beginning ; trained, encouraged, corrected by her, and thus led to ever higher sanctity ; she went before her to the eternal home, leaving among her contemporaries a well-founded repute of heroic sanctity. It is well to have her story set before us in the English language. The reading of it will make better known the vicissitudes, contradictions, difficulties, and misunderstandings which accompanied the first Foundations of the Order of the Visitation, and manifested their supernatural origin and character. It will, moreover, serve to make clearer the purpose of this holy Institute ; a matter of importance in these days, when God is wonderfully drawing many souls to desire and to seek that closer and more intimate union with Himself which is to be found in the enclosed contemplative orders of the Catholic Church. The Visitation holds a very honoured place among those orders ; and it has abundantly proved its life-giving power both in the sanctification of individual souls, and in the service which it has rendered and is ever rendering to the Church. May God, by the thought of St. Francis of Sales, of Saints Jane Frances and Margaret Mary, and of the many of whom Jeanne Charlotte Bréhard is a type, lead into the same way of life other devout and earnest souls. May He too, by the same examples, and their powerful intercession, render daily more fervent those whom He has already called into the peaceful seclusion of the Visitation of Holy Mary.

FRANCIS CARDINAL BOURNE,
Archbishop of Westminster.

*Feast of Saint Margaret Mary,
October 17th, 1923.*

AUTHORS' PREFACE

THE facts of this the first English life of Jeanne Charlotte de Brécharde are drawn from :

(1) The new and enlarged edition (Paris, Ch. Pousielgue, Rue Cassette 15, 1892) of "Les Vies de quatre des premières Mères de l'Ordre de la Visitation de Sainte-Marie" : par la Révérende Mère de Chaugy, Supérieure du première Monastère de cet Ordre, 1659.

(2) "Œuvres de Saint François de Sales." Édition complète Emmanuel Vite, Lyon, Paris, Annecy. This work is still in process of publication, twenty-one volumes of it have already appeared.

(3) "L'Histoire inédite des Fondations des Monastères d'Annecy, de Moulins, et de Riom."

(4) "Sainte Jeanne Françoise de Chantal : Sa vie et ses œuvres." Édition authentique. E. Plon & Cie., Rue Garancière 10, Paris.

(5) "Abrégé de l'Esprit intérieur des Religieuses de la Visitation de Sainte-Marie. Expliqué par St. François de Sales, Évêque et Prince de Genève, leur Instituteur. Et recueilli par feu Mgr. de Maupas, Évêque d'Evreux." Seconde édition. Paris, Le Clerc, Quai des Augustins 35, 1823. It will be seen (page 212) that the process of beatification of this servant of God and of St. Chantal were introduced together, September 9th, 1714. Prospero Lambertini, the postulator of the causes, later Pope Benedict XIV, thought it wiser in the interests of both

Authors' Preface

causes to withdraw temporarily that of Mother de Bréchart and to devote himself to the beatification of the Foundress of the Visitation.

Not until 1767 did the canonisation of St. Chantal take place. The moment was not a propitious one to reintroduce the cause of her holy companion. France was disturbed by the Jansenist heresy, the air was full of the threatened revolution, vague fears paralysed the courage and the energies of the Faithful; then followed the actual revolution and the subsequent persecution of Religious Orders, and poverty reigned throughout the French Church. Because of these many insurmountable difficulties it is only to-day, as we write, that the virtues of Jeanne Charlotte de Bréchart are again under the consideration of the Sacred Congregation of Rites and, this time, with every hope of a successful termination.

The title *Déposée* given to the immediate predecessor in office of the actual Superior—a title peculiar to the Visitation Order—we have left untranslated.

The title “your Charity” by which the sisters address one another is customary in the Order.

In references “*Œuvres*” always signify the works and letters of St. Francis de Sales and “*Vie et œuvres*” those of St. Chantal, as may be seen by the context.

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THE LIFE OF JEANNE CHARLOTTE DE BRÉCHARD

CHAPTER I

DAWN OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

THE end of the sixteenth and the dawn of the seventeenth century saw the European world emerging from the effects of the revolt against the simple faith of the Middle Ages. The Renaissance had succeeded in raising a rebellion against mediæval scholasticism and “attempted to set up a counter-attraction by the revival of classical thought in all its glamour.” The time was a difficult one for the Church of God, for the new philosophy ignored every reality save what it chose to accept from the ancient world, and meanwhile the French kings were perpetually encroaching on the rights of the Church. A glance back at the early years of the sixteenth century shows us a concordat between Leo X and Francis I of France than which there is nothing stricter on record.

(1) The Concordat of 1516 between Leo X and Francis I of France, confirmed by the fifth Lateran Council, was a result of the long controversy between the Holy See and the French Government over the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges. Besides abolishing the Pragmatic Sanction the terms of this Concordat (*a*) gave

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to the King the right of presentation to bishoprics, abbeys, and priories ; (*b*) the Concordat, however, maintained the Pope's right of confirmation, devolution (*i.e.* the right to appoint of his own choice if the King did not present a candidate within the required time), and the reservation of bishoprics made vacant by the death of the incumbents while at the Papal Court ; (*c*) it contained also stipulations concerning the annates and other matters. ("Catholic Encyclopædia," Vol. IV, p. 203.)

(2) Concordats were almost always made contrary to the ordinary Canon Law and this particular one appears to have exceeded all others in strictness. It seems as null and void whatever contrary is attempted by subsequent pontiffs. (*Ibid.* Vol. IV, p. 199.)

As at other epochs of her history so at this, the Church found it expedient to relinquish some of her natural rights in order to secure from the State a promise to refrain from other and graver encroachments.

Despoiled in part of her birthright in France, and dependent for her hierarchy on the precarious goodwill of the unprincipled house of Valois, the Bride of Christ presented a sad and humiliating spectacle. Three hundred thousand of her benefices were by this Concordat placed at the disposal of the sovereign and used by him to enrich the families of his courtiers. The temptation to select for these benefices not the most worthy and learned, but the most supple and docile to his will, was too strong for the Valois. And not yet content with these enormous advantages, Francis I in 1539 succeeded in still further curtailing the action of the Church by the Ordonnance of Villers-Cotterets which restricted the power of the ecclesiastical tribunals solely to spiritual

Dawn of the Seventeenth Century

affairs ; whereas, up to this time the faithful had applied to them in a multitude of civil cases.¹

In 1537 the Council of Trent was convoked to examine and condemn the errors promulgated by Luther and other reformers and to reform the discipline of the Church. So serious were the quarrels throughout Europe that it was found necessary several times to prorogue its sittings and its conclusion was almost despaired of. France had been the chief difficulty of this Council, and in no country was the counter-revolution, *i.e.* the Catholic revival, so late in coming into effect. Nowhere else has there been such danger of a great disaster, owing to the close connection between Church and State and to the so-called Gallican liberties which transferred into the hands of the King and nobles powers naturally belonging to the Church.² In August 1559 Pope Paul IV lay dying at the Vatican, and turning to the Jesuit, Père Laynez, he said : " From the time of St. Peter there has not been a pontificate so unfortunate as mine. How I regret the past ! Pray for me." And Luigi Mocenigo, Venetian Ambassador at Rome, sent thence to the signiory this report on the situation : " In many countries obedience to the Pope has almost ceased, and matters are becoming so critical that, if God does not interfere, they will soon be desperate Germany leaves little hope of being cured, Poland is in almost as hopeless a state. The disorders which have just lately taken place in France and Spain are too well known for me to speak of them ; and the kingdom of England after returning a short time since to her old obedience has

¹ Gagnol, " Histoire de l'Éurope et de la France," Vol. II, p. 444.

² See " Catholic Encyclopædia," Vol. IV.

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again fallen into heresy. Thus the spiritual power of the Pope is so straitened that the only remedy is a Council summoned by the common consent of all princes. Unless this reduces the affairs of religion to order, a grave calamity is to be feared." Another Venetian diplomatist wrote, not long after, that Cardinal Morone, when leaving for the Council, told him that, "there was no hope." Thus amidst endless difficulties caused by the factious overbearing princes of the day, the bishops in 1561 resumed the Council. They came resolved to do their utmost and did it with world-acknowledged success. Two years later, in 1563, in the reign of Pope Pius IV, the Council of Trent closed, and from it have ensued more beneficial results than from any other Œcumenical Council.¹

Succeeding years proved the truth of the old adage that "the darkest hour is before the dawn." The good in the heart of the French nation was about to reawaken. Men began once more to return to the belief that they were sons of God, that His Fatherhood overruled their destinies, that they were born to an inheritance—heirs to an eternal kingdom which the Renaissance and Humanism ignored, that "earth is not even earth without heaven, as a landscape is not a landscape without the sky, and that in a universe without God there is not room enough for a man."² The vigour of the old faith was, each succeeding day, making itself once more manifest by martyrdom in the British Isles, in Japan and elsewhere. Indeed in Japan "the blood of martyrs was proving so fruitful and was bearing such countless children to the

¹ See "Catholic Encyclopædia," Vol. IV, p. 438 sq.

² G. K. Chesterton.

Dawn of the Seventeenth Century

Church that it often happened that the exhausted missionary's arm had to be supported while pouring the cleansing waters on the vast multitudes." ¹ India and China, too, were bearing much fruit to the Church. Neither were the Roman pontiffs idle : St. Pius V succeeded Pius IV in 1566 and added the lustre of sanctity to his high office. Gregory XIII began his reign in 1572 by reforming the calendar. Thirteen years later the text of the Canon Law was corrected under Sixtus V. The Vatican Septuagint came forth in 1589, and in 1592 the Latin Vulgate ; while Baronius was writing his history of the Church. All this good work was being effected in spite of the Renaissance and the Reformation, or perhaps it would be more correct to say, the Church, though at no time laying down the arms of her apostolate, was by the prevailing evils urged to an increased vigour of action. Elizabeth of England was not only persecuting in her own land, but in Ireland (after a truce between Essex and O'Neill, all negotiations for peace being rendered fruitless by the refusal of the Queen and her Government on the one vital point to which O'Neill held, freedom of religious worship) a wholesale and skilfully organised scheme for reducing the whole country by famine was devised. Then was to be seen that the Irish preferred death by starvation to denial of their God. They perished by thousands over the whole land, and by the sacrifice of their lives they proved the old faith within them to be unconquerable. Absolute power over their bodies the Queen undoubtedly possessed and never relinquished, but it was manifest that power over their

¹ "The Jesuits, their Foundation and History," Vol. I, p. 268.

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souls she had none.¹ While thus active in Ireland, Elizabeth was not unmindful of the heretics in France and was helping the Huguenots in their conflict with the Church. France was at the time the dominant European Power, thanks to her great victories in the field and in the art of diplomacy, and before the close of the seventeenth century she was a learned and cultured nation. At its opening the French Salon made its appearance under the presidency of the Marquise de Rambouillet. It threw for a century or more an intellectual glamour, such as the society of cultivated and brilliant women is peculiarly fitted to throw, over Parisian society. Yet great were the difficulties still to be faced. The newly awakened passion for learning was, in the early years of the century, out-balanced by the extravagant demands of court etiquette; the slightest infringement of its punctilios being enough to create a political contest or a national misunderstanding if not even weightier consequences. The jealousies in regard to precedence at court, the technicalities of levée and drawing-room etiquette, were debasing to the intelligence. Looking back upon them from our own day we marvel that men and women born to Christian heritage should so willingly have subjected themselves to these inane requirements of society.

As might be expected with such social conditions, the French pulpit was still dominated by the classic learning and the floral eloquence of the Renaissance. It was truly a time wherein sane and level minds were needed to guide a nation awakening to the need of a great

¹ Mountjoy's correspondence, Moryson, from Joyce's "Child's History of Ireland," ch. xli.

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renovation. And Providence, not unmindful of the Eldest Daughter of the Church, who in her darkest hour has never failed to bring forth saints and heroes, sent a young Savoyard of noble birth, Francis de Sales, to teach France how, if she chose, to lift herself from her low estate to a moral greatness befitting the dominant power of Europe. The simple life, the earnest purpose, the vigour and the virtue of this young priest, the pure, calm atmosphere that impregnated his surroundings breathed moral health and principles of truth upon all who came in contact with him. Recognising in this man of God one who was both a human spirit speaking to the world and a spiritual man to raise it, the better minds turned with revulsion from their dilettante lives. Into the court circle he threw his challenge and appealed to their torpid but not, thank God, extinct higher instincts. He began to preach. Daring to disregard the pulpit oratory in vogue, he told his hearers of the fundamental truths of Christianity in a new and simple eloquence, the eloquence which flows from the heart of the preacher to the heart of his hearers. With the perspicacity that is so often a mark of sanctity or of genius, he looked ahead and, foreseeing the future result of present action, he bent all his energies to the work at hand. Overflowing with zeal, yet is there no evidence of his contesting the relinquished privileges of the Church ; rather does his immediate mission appear to have been to circumvent the inevitable abuses arising therefrom by bringing Christ to birth in each individual soul ; by which means he made the reform of the clergy, and of monastic life in particular, his life-long labour. Thus did he hope to provide with healing power the deep and broad waters of the distant

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river by purifying at its source each rivulet and stream till, throwing themselves into the flowing tide, they should impart to it their own virtues and endue it with curative properties. In firm and gentle language he preached in season and out of season till all France rang with his fame. The influence of the classics on the educated classes had not been favourable to the true Christian spirit, and to help in remedying this abuse of learning he found material in plenty at hand, needing only to be taught in order to promote the cause of righteousness. It is of a portion of this material that we propose to treat in the coming pages.

CHAPTER II

THE FOUNDERS OF THE VISITATION

THE number of women of talent and distinction who were able and willing to help Francis de Sales in his missionary work was no mean asset. Of these he led many forward in the path of perfection through the embarrassments of the world in which they lived, and their lives reacted with salutary influence on their surroundings. Others, not content with any form of renunciation save the most complete, he formed into a congregation, and this congregation soon developed into an Order known as the Order of the Visitation. Any life-story of a member of this Order, such as we now propose to write of Jeanne Charlotte de Bréhard, calls for an introduction to its Founders, and to this we will devote a few pages.

Up to the seventeenth century the austerities practised in the regular monasteries of women precluded all but the physically strong from entering them, yet, not infrequently, the less robust in health, nay, even those of very frail constitution, possessed a vigour of mind and will and a spiritual instinct that peculiarly fitted them for religious life. This question presented a problem of keen interest to the Bishop of Geneva, and how to deal with it was his constant prayer. While turning the matter over in his mind it pleased providence that the Baroness de Chantal, a woman of rare capacity, should cross his path. He

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soon gauged her worth and resolved through her to help those other women whose circumstances evoked his sympathy, and also to raise the decadent standard of religious life by using her as a reformer of the monasteries that had fallen from their first fervour.

When these two great souls met both were in the vigour of age¹ and possessed a keen vision of the eternal through the temporal. Both alike had that depth and strength of character which nerves to great undertakings, and each was bent on attaining the same sublime goal. Graced with all the worldly accomplishments and far more than the learning of his age, Francis was well qualified for the brilliant earthly career that lay before him. But he resolutely turned his back upon it, overcame with no small difficulty his father's resistance, and consecrated his life to the salvation of souls. His first care was to preach and to teach the word of God. Yet neither his preaching nor his teaching were the chief factors in his evangelical work, but, rather, little as he himself was aware of it, the unconscious influence and the powerful example of his own spotless and noble life.

To young and old, rich and poor, he was alike unremitting in his devotion. The child, the youth, and the aged equally looked upon him as their special friend. We have the following beautiful picture of his apostolic work with children from the pen of an eye-witness: "I have never seen such a sight," says La Rivière; "this loving and truly good father was raised as on a throne of two or three steps, all the child-army around him. It

¹ St. Jane Frances was at this time thirty-two years of age and St. Francis thirty-six. Less than two years previously (December 8, 1602) he had been consecrated Bishop of Geneva.

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was delightful beyond words to hear how familiarly he expounded the rudiments of our faith, the most brilliant comparisons one after another fell from his lips. He looked at his little world and the eyes of his little world were fixed upon him. He made himself a child with them to form in them the man perfect according to Jesus Christ."

As the Apostle of youth he taught, "to tell little lies in gaiety of heart, to be a little ill-regulated in words, in acts, in looks, in dress, amusements, games, dances is nothing provided that as soon as these spiritual spiders enter our conscience we hunt them out."

At the period when Francis began to preach it had come to be considered that dancing, feasting, plays and other worldly amusements were incompatible with devotion; hence society was deprived of the salutary influence of good people and society in return branded them as selfish, peculiar, bigoted. Our Saint changed all this, he made piety attractive and lovable. He taught his young people how to use these things without compromising devotion. As a mere pleasure he forbade them, while allowing them as a duty. "Where charity bids you go to balls go," he would say; "but let not your going interfere with other duties that charity no less demands."

As the Apostle of men and women of the world St. Francis had one pre-eminent maxim: to do God's will. This he taught was the virtue of virtues. To each soul he would say, "God's will is for you to be here, exactly in such a place with certain duties antecedent to all other duties, certain work to do, certain burdens, certain means; bend your will in compliance, have no

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choice, let nothing interfere between you and them ; however holy it might seem it would cause a separation between you and your God . . . and again were it our duty to tend swine all our lives . . . this, for us, would be the bull's-eye of perfection at which we should aim."

But above all was he an Apostle to his own Priests and Religious. "I say in truth," he says in one of his earliest episcopal exhortations to his clergy, "that ignorance in priests is more to be feared than sin because by it we not only ruin ourselves but dishonour and degrade the priesthood. I beseech you then to give yourselves seriously to study ; knowledge in a priest is the eighth sacrament of the ecclesiastical hierarchy." Not only in his own diocese but throughout France he was the apostle of men and women consecrated to God.

To his own privileged Daughters of the Visitation he taught the holy art of perfection as he had taught it in a minor degree to the secular world from the pulpit. Two natures he held to be in every created human being, and the conflict between these two was the first element of the spiritual life. The next in importance was to aim at attaining the perfect union of the creature's will with that of the Creator. Penance he unceasingly preached, but not the penance of corporal austerity, that was to be replaced by penance of the heart and of the will. And this continual interior mortification was to be attained by the remembrance of the presence of God, by a singleness of intention in all acts and a constant raising of the heart to God by interior aspirations.

As a writer Ozanam considered him the greatest of the seventeenth century. Although he says of himself that he wrote little and published less, he did actually write

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more than St. Athanasius, or St. Gregory Nazianzen, or St. Ambrose, or St. Leo, or St. Anselm ; but by far the largest part of his work appeared posthumously. His writings extend over the whole range of sacred subjects. Henry IV, whose affection for the Saint has been made historic by more than one charming anecdote, begged of him to write some book "in which," says Hamon, "religion should be presented in its native beauty, freed from all superstition and scruple, practicable to all classes of society . . . compatible with the agitation of the world and the turmoil of affairs." In compliance with this request St. Francis published a series of letters he had written to one of his penitents, Madame de Charmois, which he had already been urged to make public, under the title "Introduction to a Devout Life."¹ Henry declared the book was far beyond what he had asked. It soon found its way into almost every European country and was translated into seventeen languages. Upon reading it James I of England, it is said, petulantly asked why none of his bishops could write such a book. Pope Clement VII recommended it to his nephew in these words : "For twenty years I owe the conversion of my manners to the reading of this book if there is anything in me exempt from vice." Such success as a writer was not without its immense labours. The author himself tells us that a certain fourteen lines in another of his books, "*Traité de l'Amour de Dieu*," cost him the reading of 1200 folio pages.

¹ It is of interest to note that at the National Catholic Congress held in Birmingham, August 7, this year (1923), Father Wilkinson, O.M.I., mentions in his report of the Oblate Missions abroad, that a Priest of that Order in Ceylon has of late translated into Singhalese amongst other works the "Introduction to a Devout Life," by St. Francis de Sales.

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As a preacher he was no less renowned. Towards the close of the year 1618 he went to Paris in the suite of the Cardinal of Savoy and remained for ten months, during which he preached usually twice and often thrice a day. The largest church could not contain the crowds that flocked to hear him. Men got up by ladders to the windows and made holes in the roof to catch at least the tones of his voice. As to his method of preaching, he adhered strictly to the advice he had given his own clergy.¹ His style and words were of the utmost simplicity, stripped of all extraneous ornament, to leave God's word in its intrinsic beauty. Du Val, de Berulle, Gallement, put themselves at his feet and sent their disciples to learn true eloquence from his discourses. Henry IV said he considered him the greatest preacher in the world and often discussed his sermons with his courtiers. No less than five times he tried, but without success, to secure such a treasure of learning and sanctity for his own kingdom. When offered the coadjutorship of Paris and other ecclesiastical benefices the Saint's answer to the King was, that he could not forsake his poor wife of Geneva, to whom he was espoused, for a rich one.

St. Vincent de Paul in his deposition for the canonisation of St. Francis says: "He (our Francis) was mighty in persuasion, exciting, and as it were constraining his hearers to amend their lives or to abjure heresy. He told me that he knew when someone was inwardly touched while he was preaching because something went

¹ In a letter to Andrew Frémyot, Archbishop of Bourges, he condemns what he calls "a certain tickling of the ear by secular elegance and tricks of language. As to this," he says, "I deny utterly that the preacher should ever think of it. It should be left to the orators of this world, who preach not Christ but themselves."

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out of him, which did not come from his own movement and which he had not premeditated, in a way that he could not understand and by a divine impulse. He was certain of it because souls came to him afterwards and declared to him the words which had touched them. And his testimony is true, for not only were his words so many fiery torches to inflame souls, but his doctrine was a sermon. . . . When I thought over his words they excited in my mind such admiration that I felt him to be the one who best represented the Son of Man conversing on earth. . . . He formed as it were the body of his penitents unto the spiritual life by his marvellous counsels and then breathed into them the motive of love as the breath of life.”¹ From the same process we have the evidence of Vaugelas, the author of “*Remarques sur la langue Française*.” He deposed on March 16: “It is certain that as to preaching Francis sought rather to see himself humbled than praised. Though he was esteemed learned and eloquent he did not try to appear either the one or the other, but on the contrary he made himself so homely and so intelligible that those who only admire discourses which they do not understand blamed him for adopting this too great facility which they dared to call commonplace [*bassesse*]. . . . His profound humility did not hinder him from saying the truth with simplicity to his familiar friends. For instance, I heard him say several times that a certain slowness and a certain difficulty in explaining himself which appeared in his sermons did not proceed from dearth but rather from abundance of matter, for so many thoughts and words presented themselves at a time

¹ Process of canonisation of Francis de Sales, April 17, 1628.

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that he hesitated which to choose. . . . I never heard a preacher who so carried me away, who moved me so sensibly as he." Much more does this distinguished writer say in praise of the learning, judgment, and piety of Francis ; but we must restrain our pen and leave to the writers of his life the enviable task of recounting all the good we are told of this wonderful human saint. Yet, at the risk of wearying our readers, we will give one more appreciation from a very different source, a non-Catholic of our time, Leigh Hunt. He says in an article entitled, "The Gentleman Saint": "He [Francis de Sales] is a true God-send, a man of men, a real quintessence of Christian charity and shrewd sense withal (though these are not only far from incompatible but perfectly amalgamable), in short a man as sensible as Dr. Johnson with all the piety and patience the Doctor desired to have, all the lowliness and kind fellowship it would have puzzled him to behold in a prelate, and all the delicacy and truth which would have transported him. Like Fénelon (but much superior to Fénelon), he was a sort of gentleman, a species of phoenix which we must say the French Church seems to have produced beyond any other. . . . But let our reader see for himself what a nature the man had, what wisdom in simplicity, what undeviating kindness, what shrewd worldly discernment with unworldly feelings, what capital Johnsonian good sense and wit too, and illustrations sometimes as familiar as any heart could desire, at others in the very depth of the heart of sentiment and poetic grace."¹

What St. Ignatius and his children were for the general doctrine of the Church, St. Teresa and St. John

¹ *The Seer*, Part II, No. 40.

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of the Cross for her higher mystical teaching, St. Charles for the reformation of the clergy, St. Francis de Sales was for pointing out and justifying her way of conducting souls to God. Though he did not teach new things he taught them in a new way, and proved them to be the true Gospel teaching. He applied the old doctrines to present needs, answered the current and specious objections of the day, brought out the truth, and recommended the practices most needed at the time. He gave a new life to moral truth, systematised it, explained it, and enforced it. . . . He loved the Church with a passionate love, and the converse of this love in him was his hatred of heresy. Those who only know him as the loving-hearted gentle teacher of devout souls only half know him. This lamb changes into an angry lion when there is question of the honour of his Mother (the Church), or rather his hatred of heresy is of the nature of loathing. "I have never looked upon it [heresy]," he says, "save to spit in its face." He proves on Luther's own admission that his heresy was propagated by hypocrisy and lies. He lays bare the foundations which alone could have upborne that gigantic mass of prejudice which has blotted out the idea of the Church from so many minds during the last three hundred years. To individual heretics he is kind, as Christ was to sinners, but to the declared enemies of the Church of God he showed no tenderness, and of such he says: "It is charity to cry 'Wolf' when the wild beast is in the fold or indeed wherever he may be."

Such was this God-sent man. The woman who helped in the same cause, Jeanne Françoise de Chantal, was a young widow, the mother of four children, who at the

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time she met St. Francis was seeking by prayer and self-sacrifice to learn God's designs in her regard, for she felt herself called to something higher than the life she was leading in the world. The spiritual affinity of these kindred souls soon united them in close bonds of friendship. The holy Bishop loved Madame de Chantal with both a natural and supernatural affection as only the great of soul can love: and he freely and with the utmost simplicity expressed his natural feelings, making use of such feelings in himself and in the pure soul of Madame de Chantal to rise to greater love of God. She, too, had that innate hatred of heresy, as exemplified in her childhood, when we are told that between the age of five and six she one day heard a heretic discussing with her father the doctrine of the Real Presence. Flushed with excitement Jeanne intervened in the dispute, telling her father's friend that he must believe in the Real Presence because Jesus Christ Himself asserted it, and that if he did not believe he would be calling Christ a liar. The astonished gentleman, looking down upon the small child, offered her a box of sugar-plums which he had brought for her. Jeanne took them very readily, but instantly threw them into the fire, crying out triumphantly as she did so: "That is how heretics will be burnt because they do not believe what our Lord says," and then turning to this gentleman she said with much indignation: "If you had contradicted the King, the President, who is my Papa, would hang you, and because you have contradicted our Lord His Presidents, who are St. Peter and St. Paul, will hang you."

Both St. Francis and St. Chantal possessed in a remarkable degree the gift of common sense, without which,

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Samuel Butler tells us, there is no use in trying to be a saint, for that same common sense which in the man of the world is so valuable an asset to success is none the less indispensable in the saint, differentiated, however, in the use made of it, and of the end it pursues. Yet their characters were for the most part dissimilar. Fortitude in St. Chantal was not, until she fell under the influence of St. Francis, accompanied with that suavity and tenderness which distinguished his apostolate. But from the time she placed herself under his direction a very perceptible change took place in her character, and these qualities so grew in her soul that in her later years she rivalled her holy director in that sweetness and kindly consideration for others for which he was so remarkable. Her humility in her intercourse with her daughters shows itself repeatedly in her letters. She encouraged them freely to express their views and frequently accepted their decisions as the best. Her penetration of character, as may be seen in the opinion she formed of Angélique Arnauld, the Abbess of Port Royal, was not remarkable, and at times throughout her life she suffered from having formed a more favourable estimate of individuals than they deserved, whereas discernment of spirits always distinguished St. Francis. On the other hand, he was largely influenced by her solid judgment, her prudence in all practical and business matters, and her power of foreseeing the bearing of details on larger issues, as is seen in the workings of the Institute conjointly founded by them, although St. Jane Frances always disclaimed the title of foundress, and would only allow herself to be called the eldest sister of the Visitation.

Both St. Francis and Madame de Chantal bent all

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their energies to educate their daughters to cope with the needs of the coming times, and with wide outlook this the Order of the Visitation did from within the cloister. Thither came the Queens, Anne of Austria, Henrietta Maria, Catherine of Braganza, Marie of Modena, the ladies of their courts and many others, amongst whom was the foundress's grand-daughter, Madame de Sévigné, their object being to withdraw for a little time apart from the world to energise their flagging spiritual strength, or to receive new vigour to bear the trials of life.

We cannot better conclude this brief sketch than with the words of St. Francis de Sales. "I never read," he says, "the description of the valiant woman of Solomon without thinking of Mother de Chantal."

The greater part of the foregoing chapter has been taken in substance, and partly in wording, from some essays on St. Francis de Sales, contributed to the *Dublin Review* by Canon Mackey, O.S.B., reprinted by Burns and Oates, London, 1883.

CHAPTER III

LA GALERIE

IN the quiet little town of Annecy, amidst the mountains of Savoy, in the eventful year of 1610, which witnessed the assassination of Henry IV, Saint Francis de Sales founded his new Order of the Visitation. By the dedication to God of three chosen souls, Madame de Chantal, Mademoiselles Favre and de Brécard, he set in motion a spring of healing waters ; silently it permeated, first the soil to which it was indigenous, and then broadening out irrigated the spiritual life of all the chief centres of France and beyond.

One June evening three women were set apart by the Bishop of Geneva in the little house of La Galerie to devote themselves exclusively to a life of hidden apostolate. Had the attention of the world by any accident been momentarily directed towards them, the mere pressure of the overwhelming events of the period would have quickly obliterated from the memory an occurrence of such seemingly slight importance, yet when the final day of reckoning comes, how far more productive of good to a nation will the energising of the dormant forces of the soul, the awakening of the spiritual sense within, prove to have been than any material conquest or betterment of a people's condition.

Every new spiritual birth, every life-giving spring

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that comes from God, the Giver of all life, has for escort the sword of the Cross, and this sure protection failed not to safeguard the pioneers of the Visitation. No gathering together of God's elect solely for His greater glory, no body of men or women forming a congregation wherein the workings of virtue in the individual souls of its members are the only dramas and the subjection of the inner self the only conquest reckoned worthy of attainment, can make progress without this warrant of security. The Cross is as indispensable to such an undertaking as the founder whose thought under God inspired it. Each vexation, each difficulty it encounters, is an evidence like Faith of the good things to come.

The first difficulty that presented itself was brought about by the mistaken vocation of a certain Baroness de Cusy. Her husband, a gentleman of Savoy devotedly attached to the Capuchin Fathers, thought it to be the will of God that he should leave his wife, take his son with him, and join these religious.¹ The Baroness appears on her side to have been equally convinced that God intended her to establish a convent of Carmelites, or a house of Tertiaries over which, presumably, she was to rule. This lady's niece, Mademoiselle de Chappot, fell in with the idea, developed a vocation suitable to her aunt's arrangements, and proposed to join her. St. Francis,

¹ That St. Francis was doubtful of this vocation is evident from the following written to Mother de Chantal, December 1609. Referring to it he writes: "I did not answer him [the Baron], but now he has come again. We have talked the matter over and there seems to be no way of getting it out of his head." (*Œuvres de St. François de Sales.* Publiée sous les auspices de Mgr. l'Évêque d'Annecy par les soins de Religieuses de la Visitation du 1^{er} Monastère d'Annecy. Édition complète. Tome XIV ; Lettres Vol. IV, p. 228. Lyon, Paris. Emmanuel Vitte. 1906.)

La Galerie

who if there were a thousand motives by which an action might be impelled bade us always attribute the best to our neighbour, refers to this matter in a letter to Père Pollien, dated May 24, 1610: "About a year ago some devout souls proposed to me to establish a convent for women and offered a substantial sum of money for building and founding it. Knowing how these daughters desire to withdraw from the world and that the existing convents are not to their liking, I have accepted their offer and promised to give them every help."¹

Encouraged by the Bishop's approval and with his knowledge the Baron de Cusy purchased a small house called La Galerie in a faubourg of Annecy very suitably placed for the erection of future convent buildings. In a little time he had arranged it for the accommodation of twelve persons—the number that he and Madame de Cusy considered indispensable for a foundation. This lady spoke freely of her project in the hope of inducing others to join her, so that it soon became noised abroad and was discussed on all sides. Mademoiselle de Bréhard, whose own future was so closely connected with the turn of events, and therefore no uninterested spectator, tells us that Madame de Cusy's conviction as to her capabilities for direction and organisation were not shared by her husband.

Meanwhile the holy Bishop's project was taking shape and its Mother-elect, Madame de Chantal, was universally held in high esteem for her discretion and piety. The Baron being aware of all this, urged his wife and niece to dedicate themselves to God in the manner of life planned

¹ "Œuvres," Tome XIV ; Lettres Vol. IV, p. 305.

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by the Bishop and to put themselves under the direction of Madame de Chantal, thus merging the two pious projects into one. The good man welcomed this idea of his as the happiest of inspirations, for by its means he not only procured for his wife a safe pilot but for his own vocation greater security. Contemporaneously with his inspiration came the news that at the last moment Mademoiselle de Chappot announced her inability to make up her mind to forsake the pleasures of the world for the cloister. This news strengthened the Baron's desire about his wife, and he hastened to unburden himself to the Bishop.

Mademoiselle de Bréchart, of whose facile pen and quick perception we are availing ourselves in relating this first cross of the new Foundation, says: "Our Blessed Father, who was extremely willing and accessible in regard to all pious projects, told the Baron that he would speak to our Mother, and this he did on her return from Sales." But while she was yet away Madame de Cusy began to show signs of wavering, for on April 2 [1610] we find St. Francis writing to her: "Do not trouble at all about what the world says, for it is the enemy of God's glory, and of the good of souls. The Pope does not, it is true, wish that Orders should be founded without reason and without permission, but when God wills it he encourages their foundation. . . . There are still some alterations to be made in our little new building, yet nothing that need delay the starting of our project, which I hope to inaugurate, please God, on Whit Sunday. . . . You will find good companions already there who long for the happy day when they can irrevocably consecrate themselves to the only object of their love.

La Galerie

You ought, I think, to prepare to arrive by that date. I will be there also and will arrange things so that you will find in your new life all the consolations and sweetness that you could desire.”¹

But Madame de Cusy’s hesitation by no means diminished, for on May 2 we find St. Francis again writing to her: “I conjure you examine your heart thoroughly so as to find out if you have the love, strength, and courage wholly to give yourself to Jesus Christ crucified, and to bid adieu to this miserable world. The good companionship in which you will find yourself will serve indeed little by little to strengthen you, but none the less must you think well whether you have courage for it before you take the step.”²

The “good companionship” of the first Visitation Sisters, far from being an inducement, proved a decided deterrent to Madame de Cusy, who apparently felt no desire to place herself under obedience to Madame de Chantal, and she informed the Bishop that she and the ladies who awaited her “on all sides” wished to become Carmelites or Tertiaries but not religious of the new congregation.

St. Francis, upon learning this, rather than abandon to the world souls that the Master might have chosen for His special service, did not hesitate, with marvellous condescension, to put aside for the time the establishment of his own Institute, the realisation of which he had so much at heart. He told Madame de Chantal on her return to Annecy that he had quite resolved to employ her for one year in the service and guidance of a number

¹ “Œuvres,” Tome XIV ; Lettres Vol. IV, pp. 287-8.

² *Ibid.* pp. 293-4.

Life of Jeanne Charlotte de Brechard

of virtuous ladies in order to train them to the religious life under the rule of the Carmelites or Tertiaries. The daughter was worthy of the father. It cost Madame de Chantal dearly to accept this obedience, but she did not hesitate fully to acquiesce in St. Francis's arrangements, for she had put herself under obedience to him and she trusted not herself. Hardly had she made this painful sacrifice when the Baron de Cusy announced to St. Francis that his dear wife, after all preparations were completed for her departure, had besought God once more to give a final token of His will. The following night she had an attack of fever and hæmorrhage, and taking it as an answer to her prayer, had definitely resolved to renounce the idea of religious life. Great was the relief to Madame de Chantal upon receiving this news, but greater still was the embarrassment of St. Francis. Truly he had no special desire that these ladies should form the nucleus of his Institute, but he had reckoned on their house : and now, says Mlle. de Bréchard, began financial complications in regard to it. The seller of La Galerie, M. de la Pesse, consented to take back his furniture, and finally accepted a promissory note from St. Francis for payment of the purchase money, while he returned to the parties Cusy and Chappot the sum he had received from them. This settlement was not concluded without endless *pourparlers*, innumerable goings and comings to and fro, and a last appeal from St. Francis to Mademoiselle de Chappot to reconsider her decision : but the answer to this letter was not as he had hoped and was quickly clenched by an announcement of the young lady's marriage.

Then at last the holy Bishop felt himself justified in



FIRST MONASTERY OF THE VISITATION
MAISON DE LA GALERIE, 1610



PRESENT MONASTERY OF THE VISITATION, OPENED IN 1911,
AND LAKE OF ANNECY

La Galerie

acting with entire freedom, and on Trinity Sunday, which that year fell on June 6, Madame de Chantal, with her two companions, Demoiselles de Favre and de Bréchar, took possession of La Galerie, and began to put in practice the life he had planned for them.

CHAPTER IV

JEANNE CHARLOTTE DE BRÉCHARD¹

To every true Christian it is an indefinable but an indisputable fact—a mystery but no less a fact—that suffering is one of the chief blessings this world can provide. We are so constituted that until we have suffered we cannot be said truly to have lived. Suffering is the ordinary channel through which the highest things of life are revealed to us. It opens the door to realities. If it does not precede heavenly favours it invariably accompanies or follows them. Jeanne Charlotte de Bréchard, one, as we have seen, of the chosen three to inaugurate the Order of the Visitation and whose life-story we propose to give in these pages, was a striking illustration of this rule. The analogy between her early environment and her character is of interest, for her birthplace and parentage shadow forth her future career.

Some five leagues from the town of Beaune the Château de Vellerot, Jeanne's natal home, looks down from the summit of one of the Burgundian hills. Successive generations have added to the building with but little or no sense of architectural beauty. It stands

¹ The Bréchards belonged to the old *noblesse* of Burgundy. They possessed considerable landed property in the Nivernais in the Middle Ages, and in course of time the family divided into several branches. Jeanne Charlotte, of whom we write, was the last representative of the Burgundian Bréchards or head of the family.

Jeanne Charlotte de Bréchard

conspicuous in the midst of a park that extends over the entire hill till it reaches, by a steep declivity, on all sides save one, the scattered houses encircling its outskirts and known as the village of Vellerot. On the north side the park descends almost perpendicularly through thickly wooded ground to a little river whose waters are darkened on either side by rows of trees. This river irrigates the long, narrow valley through which it flows. In this valley, some half hour's walk from the Château, are to be seen the ruins of the Church of Saint-Pierre-en-Vaux, where Jeanne Charlotte so often visited the Blessed Sacrament.¹

On the southern side alone in the direction of Autun the ground rises to a higher elevation than that on which the house is built ; while its other aspects command a view of sequestered and refreshing valleys far away amid the hills. Thus did Nature compensate for the cold, stern building by the pastoral beauty of its surroundings. The province is remarkable for the rich soil that lies beneath a stony rugged surface and is productive of the good Burgundian wine—meet birthplace for Jeanne Charlotte de Bréchard, who in the year 1580 was born within the uninviting pile of stone-work, and who, though destined to a youth of hardship and a life of suffering, crowned her earthly pilgrimage by the good fruit of chaste desires, “springing forth virgins.”²

At no period of her life was sorrow wanting to her ; yet even in her moments of most painful trial a bracing vigour of soul transformed her sufferings and instilled

¹ There is no evidence of there having been a private chapel in the Château.

² Zacharias ix. 17.

Life of Jeanne Charlotte de Brécharde

into them a sense of peace and fortitude. Her biography captivates the reader and vivifies his spiritual being. The strangest misfortunes, occurring without break or alleviation, attended her childhood. Had she not been the constant friend and spiritual daughter of two saints so remarkable for common sense and moderation as St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane Frances de Chantal we should discredit her early history ; the temptation would be strong to reject the story, to look upon it as the fancied workings of some demoniacal magician of an unwholesome fairy tale.

Jeanne Charlotte was the tenth child of Madame de Machecop and her husband, M. de Brécharde de Vellerot. Seven months after birth her mother died ; with her death began the troubles of the poor infant. Left to the care of a housekeeper with neither heart nor conscience, the child was utterly neglected. When four or five years old a curious malady attacked her, forthwith said to be the work of the evil one ; for those were days when any unusual mischief was, without much investigation, and with less hesitation, laid at the door of the author of evil. The malady reduced the child to extremity and the attendants believed her to be dead. They clothed her in a shroud, lighted a blessed candle, and sprinkled the body with holy water while reciting the prayers usually said over the corpse of a child. As they were ministering to her, Jeanne gave signs of returning consciousness and in due time recovered. Next we hear of her one day, while at play, tumbling from the edge of a balcony headforemost into the midst of a great heap of flint-stones and brambles, and picked up unhurt by those who expected to find her, if not dead, at least seriously injured.

Jeanne Charlotte de Bréhard

Her aunt, in whose house the accident occurred, had taken charge of her little niece out of sheer pity, but she soon found that she had to deal with no ordinary child, and that, perchance, no ordinary destiny was allotted to this child—an opinion much strengthened by this miraculous preservation.

During Jeanne Charlotte's childhood in her isolated home, the exciting scenes of the successive religious wars of the period were convulsing the world. The murder of the Duke of Guise at the close of the year 1588 by the order of Henry III was followed, the succeeding summer, by the King's own assassination. The Seigneur of Vellerot and all his sons were in the thick of the conflict, and the turbulent state of the nation somewhat, perhaps, condones M. de Bréhard's neglect of his home duties, above all in regard to his youngest child, who became a veritable Cinderella in the castle on the hill. Her brothers, all four, were killed in action, and upon her father's occasional visits home he brought with him his friends of camp life, men in no way fit company for his innocent young daughters; but this had little weight with him, his own enjoyment being his first consideration and his supreme need.

To add to the afflictions of this year, 1589, the plague broke out in a very malignant form at Vellerot; two of Jeanne's sisters caught it and died, and she herself fell ill with some of its symptoms. Her father's valour on the battlefield had won favour of the King;¹ but to face pestilence needed another order of courage, as his household now discovered. On its appearance he fled precipi-

¹ Jean de Bréhard, seigneur de Vellerot et Saint-Pierre-en-Vaux, was awarded the title of *Chevalier de l'Ordre du Roi*.

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tately from his home, leaving his little girl to the tender mercies of the unscrupulous housekeeper, from whom she had already suffered so much. Her master, safely disposed of, this woman sent the poor sick child to an infected house in the village. All the inmates of this wretched hovel had already died of the plague save two boys, who were making their living by interring the dead bodies. For six long weeks Jeanne Charlotte, who was now nine years old, lay upon straw in this poor shelter. A limited amount of food was sent her twice a week from the Château, which her keepers, boylike, chiefly consumed; nevertheless their hearts were apparently not unkind, for one of them tended the little maid, combing her hair and cleansing her from the vermin that infested the place. Jeanne in return taught him to say his prayers. One of her father's servants caught the sickness, and so utterly devoid of regard for her young mistress's feelings or sensibilities was the wretched housekeeper that, without hesitation, she sent the girl to the same lodging as her mistress. Maid and mistress shared bed and board until in a few days the servant died. The lads then wrapped the body in a shroud and asked Jeanne to take care of it while they fetched a burial cart. Terrified and trembling in every limb, the child kept as far away from the corpse as was possible in the small room, and cried her heart out till nightfall, when the boys returned. Too frightened to remain alone in the house, she begged them to take her with them while they buried the remains. They put her on the cart, meaning to be kind in their rough way, and she and the corpse were driven together to the place of burial.

After a time Jeanne ran away from her intolerable

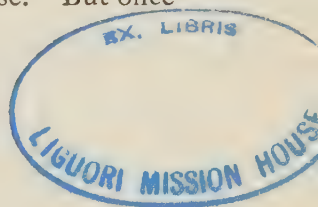
Jeanne Charlotte de Bréchard

surroundings. She wandered about the fields, living on mulberries and such wild fruit as could be gathered from the wayside hedges, while for drink she had the mountain rivulets. More than once startled by wolves that came down from the adjoining heights in search of the unburied bodies of the plague-stricken, she, who might have been so easy a prey to the fierce animals, wandered amongst them unhurt. Where she slept during those days we know not, but the good God in whom she implicitly trusted protected her life and sheltered her innocence till, the plague over, her father returned to Vellerot and she to his protection.

Only two of his children, his eldest and youngest daughters, he now found at home. Two of the elder girls had entered religion some time previously; two others, as we have seen, died of the plague, and, as already mentioned, his four sons lost their lives in the wars of the League.

At home again, M. de Bréchard considered himself relieved of all responsibility in regard to his youngest daughter by engaging a governess to look after her. He introduced this woman into his house without troubling himself to make any inquiries as to her character, and she proved to have such an ungovernable temper as, at times, to endanger the child's life. So passed the first twelve unhappy years of Jeanne Charlotte's earthly career.

In 1592 her father sent her to be educated at a Benedictine Monastery in the neighbourhood. Here, at last, one would think, the young girl was sure to receive the upbringing to which her birth entitled her: for royal blood ran in the veins of her despicable father, who was related to the houses of Bourbon and Joyeuse. But once



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again he did not even sufficiently master his indolence to inquire if this monastery was of regular observance. It was soon found to be far otherwise. The community, reduced to the Mother Abbess and three young nuns, all women of quality, spent their time in visiting the neighbouring nobility and in every available amusement. Not only the spirit of religious life, but even that of decency, had vanished from their cloisters. Instead of grammar and history, poor uneducated Jeanne was given a cookery book to study and appointed cook and housekeeper to the monastery and to its dependents, the vine-dressers and reapers. Early and late the little maid was to be seen traversing the mountain-side or the unfrequented bypaths to fetch and carry meals for these labourers. In some of the remote districts through which she passed serpents would come out of their ambush and stand up to their full height to greet her. Jeanne, though a timid child, was not frightened at their approach, but making the sign of the Cross, said a "Hail, Mary!" and passed on, while the venomous reptiles skulked back to their hiding-places.

Made prematurely reflective through suffering, Jeanne was not idle as she took these fatiguing journeys, and, although we are told by her contemporary biographer and friend¹ that she was peculiarly sensitive to the indignities put upon her despite her rank in life, they did not embitter her. She wandered as among sweet friends amidst the wild flowers, the rocks and the rugged paths; they held a mystic message for her, they were her daily companions and the sight of them an inspiration. Nature was to her not merely something beautiful to be looked upon, something outside herself, but something personal

¹ Mother de Chaugy.

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and spiritual ; her soul went out to meet it. Not a violet wafted its scent that did not bring her into touch with the unseen world, and in this world she lived. While the learned were dissecting with microscopic minuteness the material elements of rock, and earth, and flower, and discoursing eloquently thereon, Jeanne, wholly ignorant of such things, enjoyed another and more intimate form of acquaintance with them, and through them she gained a deeper knowledge of their Maker and their mission.

“Wise men, all ways of knowledge past,
To the shepherd’s wonder come at last.”

After a year or more, M. de Bréhard’s eldest daughter, for whom he seems to have had some affection, complained of loneliness, and Jeanne was recalled from the Benedictine Monastery to keep her company. Her homecoming was a change, not an alleviation of trials. From physical sufferings she now passed to moral dangers, for the Château was, as we have said, frequented by a most undesirable class of visitors. However, grace and nature seemed to combine in warding off all evil from this child of predestination, and through these new dangers Jeanne passed unscathed.

CHAPTER V

HOME

LITTLE at home as Jeanne Charlotte felt in her father's house, where the very air breathed of the earth earthy, and selfishness in one form or another dominated the household, she found comfort in her daily visits to the church, within, or almost within, the castle grounds. Here she made up her mind, she was now fourteen, to take God for her portion, and she besought Him to lead her through the encircling gloom.

As the love of Him waxed stronger, to partake of the divine mysteries had become an imperative need of her soul ; to satisfy her longing she asked to be allowed to make her first Communion. The priest to whom she spoke, knowing the unhappy circumstances and the insidious atmosphere of her upbringing, was prepared to instruct her. But upon questioning Jeanne he found, to his amazement, that this girl, who had never been taught her catechism nor in the whole course of her short life had ever heard a sermon, was thoroughly well-informed in Christian doctrine. She had, somehow, acquired a little knowledge of the rudiments of reading and writing, though not apparently from her governess, and this she made use of to study some books of devotion that she had found about the house. From these and from her crucifix she had taught herself, but, unquestionably, her chief preceptor had been the Holy Spirit, free Giver of

Home

best gifts. He had infused into her mind a knowledge of things spiritual far beyond what books can teach. Deeply impressed by God's wonderful ways with this chosen soul, the good curé no longer hesitated to give her the Bread of Life.

From this time, with unerring instinct, Jeanne felt that on earth love cannot be separated from suffering, and she began to undertake practices of severe penance. Every Friday and Saturday she fasted on bread and water. With the ingenuity of the saints she contrived for herself a wonderful girdle of haircloth made from a horsehair leash used for her father's dogs, in which she made fifteen large knots in honour of the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary, and winding it round her body she wore it continually until, by accident, her act of mortification was discovered and she was forced to lay it aside. Such austerities bespoke a call to some strict religious order, and as the loving service of her Divine Master more and more absorbed her thoughts Jeanne resolved to join the Poor Clares. But with the unaccountable inconsistency of our nature, no sooner had she announced her project than the whole household, hitherto so indifferent to her and to her future, rose up against her. Her father would not hear of it, the servants who had always looked upon her as fair sport for their ridicule, freely laughed at her, and assured her that she had gone mad. Frustrated in her designs, the disappointed girl tried to console herself by visiting the poor of the neighbourhood ; seven or eight of the sick amongst them came to her daily to have their wounds or sores dressed. M. de Bréhard continued to thwart her inclinations whatever they might be, until at last he almost succeeded in breaking the bruised

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reed. "Pain," says one of our greatest modern writers,¹ "is to be measured by the power of realising it. Hardly any one stroke of pain," he tells us, "is intolerable, it is intolerable when it continues . . . the memory of the foregoing moments of pain acts upon and (as it were) edges the pain that succeeds. If the third or fourth or twentieth moment of pain could be taken by itself, if the succession of the moments that preceded it could be forgotten it would be no more than the first moment, as bearable as the first; but what makes it unbearable is that it *is* the twentieth; that the first, the second, the third, on to the nineteenth moment of pain are all concentrated in the twentieth; so that every additional moment of pain has all the weight of all that has preceded it . . . it is the intellectual comprehension of pain as a whole diffused through successive moments which gives power and keenness . . . and it is the soul only which is capable of that comprehension." Jeanne Charlotte experienced this culmination of pain upon a certain day when M. de Bréchard had been guilty of some one of his many acts of unkindness to his daughter, one, perchance, more accentuated by callousness than usual. Be that as it may, her whole soul rose up in revolt at his never-ending petty persecution. She who had, with heroic effort, been curbing her independent nature to bear her sorrow in patience and tolerance, now broke out into indignant protest against a God who it seemed to her had singled her out for a life of unremitting suffering. Anything, she felt, would be preferable to her present miserable existence. Under the pressure of her misery she made a prompt resolve to accept a marriage from

¹ Newman, "Discourses to Mixed Congregations," p. 380.

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which she had previously turned with distaste. And what followed ? She began to lessen her time of prayer, she took the keen edge off her mortifications, she let herself slip down to an easier, a more comfortable life. Then for a passing moment she yielded to the enchantments of the first sweet taste of worldly pleasure. But Jeanne had been too long trained in the school of the Crucified not quickly to perceive that she was setting her face in the wrong direction. Her mind became a tangle of thoughts, she had no one of whom to ask advice. It was a hard moment for her, but if we take thought with ourselves we shall see that hard moments have been the foundation stones upon which we build our character. So was it with Jeanne. While in this state of perplexity, this inward struggle, her eyes one day fell upon the image of Jesus nailed to the Cross ; she was conscious of the colour rising unbidden to her cheek for very shame of her cowardice. Grace had conquered, and kneeling before her suffering Saviour she promised that none should ever share her love, and that, come what may, she would be His faithful spouse and His alone. "I found Him whom my soul loveth. I held Him and will not let Him go" (Cant. iii. 4).

Speaking in later years of this turning-point in the history of her soul, Jeanne Charlotte says : "I understood not to what I was engaging myself. The ardour of my thoughts and the faith within me so absorbed me that I could think of nothing else but my suffering Saviour : and save through the love of suffering and humiliation, save through the joy that comes of them, I saw no way of union with Him." So did she pass once more from the love of these things to the execution of them : from theory to practice.

CHAPTER VI

HER DREAM

UNTIL her twenty-fifth year Jeanne Charlotte appears to have lived with her father and sister at Vellerot, sanctifying her ordinary occupations. Her life was a lonely one, for there is no loneliness equal to that of living with uncongenial relatives. But, as in her childhood, she now continued to draw strength from the strong and rugged Nature in the midst of which the old Castle upon the hill was built. This solitary girlish figure was to be seen, unaccompanied save by her own meditative thoughts, taking her daily walks to the village church or to some one or other of the peasant families on the estate who happened to be in poverty, trouble, or sickness, to whom her visit was the bright spot in their toilsome lives.

In such wise was she taught :

“ And quickened by the Almighty’s breath
And chastened by His rod.”¹

She braced herself to meet on her return home each day the society her father drew around him—to her so distasteful. Earthly disenchantments had already done their work and made things of faith the great realities of her life. In these long walks she dreamt, as youth is

¹ Newman, *Dream of Gerontius*.

Her Dream

prone to dream, and she built many a castle in the air. But Jeanne's were spiritual castles. It is no wonder then to hear that sleep, too, had its spiritual significance for her. Indeed, God seems to have favoured her with great enlightenment as to His future demands upon her in her hours of unconsciousness. She tells us of a strange dream which she had at this time (1605). "I dreamt," she says, "that I was in a garden of flowers of rare beauty and delicious fragrance, trees laden with fruit tempting to look upon bordered the garden walks. As I contemplated the loveliness that surrounded me, in the twinkling of an eye the whole scene turned charred, black, and withered; it was as if a lightning flash had swept across the garden and reduced it to ashes. Finding myself of a sudden in the dark, I ran as best I could towards the garden gate, but the more I struggled to get through it the more did a frightful monster glare at me with eyes aflame as if ready to devour me; he would not let me pass. 'Oh, great God,' I cried, 'have pity on me, come to my succour!' Straightway as I made this prayer and crossed myself the monster vanished, and I found that I was outside the garden at the foot of a magnificent white marble staircase so high that I had not the courage to mount it, for the top was lost in the clouds. Then becoming conscious that I was unclothed, I sought to hide myself, when a stranger with a gracious countenance came forward and covering me with a scarlet mantle of ample folds bade me follow him up the staircase. I did so until I found myself in a noble palace, within a room in which was a beautiful altar, adorned as for a festival; by the altar stood a sweet and gentle looking nun clothed in black and performing some ceremony unfamiliar to

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me. She held a huntsman's horn and blew it : it sounded delightfully melodious. Then turning to me she said, 'Will you be of our party?' Most willingly, I replied, upon which she gave me as a pledge of my happiness a branch of blue flowering blossom. Once more sounding the mystic horn, she invited a multitude of others to follow her."—As Jeanne awoke the dawn was breaking.

This unusually clear and consecutive dream provided her solitary rambles with new matter for thought, and new interest. But not yet was her mind to be enlightened in regard to its spiritual bearing on her life. More than a twelvemonth elapsed before she received any clue to its interpretation, and then it came about in this wise.

In the spring of 1607 a Capuchin Father, one of the popular orators of the day, was delivering a course of sermons in a town near Vellerot,¹ and Jeanne, not apparently without much difficulty, induced her sister, who was attending these Lenten discourses, to allow her for once to accompany her. This was the first sermon she had ever heard. In the subject of the friar's discourse she recognised a partial solution of the dream that had taken such a strange hold of her. He dwelt on the transitoriness of worldly pleasures, and Jeanne thought of the lovely garden that had so quickly lost its beauty and that the demon, the Prince of this world, must have been the monster who guarded it. The staircase was now to her symbolic of the ladder of perfection, her nakedness her need of being clothed with virtues. During her long daily wanderings a sequence of thoughts evolved from this vivid dream to which her no less vivid

¹ Probably Beaune.

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imagination gave a significance perhaps more than its due. But as the time went on events seemed to fit in with it until it became a simple revelation to her. Mother de Chantal was assuredly the nun who came to her in her sleep, the holy Bishop of Geneva the kind and unknown friend who helped her.

But to return to the sermon. When it was over, probably during the quiet drive home, Jeanne asked her sister to procure for her an interview with the preacher. As usual, opposition had to be surmounted, but though little of a diplomatist she secured the meeting, and with most happy results. The friar believed her to be called to the religious life, and suggested that she should enter the Carmelites at Dijon, promising to procure her reception there. Towards the close of this year he wrote telling her that he had obtained the desired favour, and if she came to Dijon Mother Louise¹ would receive her to make a trial of her vocation. Dijon was but twelve leagues from Vellerot, and yet it seemed as inaccessible to this poor harassed girl as if it were twelve hundred. But sure of God, she besought Him to complete the work He had begun, to stretch forth His hand without delay to succour her. Strange to say (and yet in truth why should we think it strange, for God never fails us?) hardly had she made this petition when a courier most unexpectedly arrived from Monthelon, with a carriage sent by Madame de Chantal, and an invitation to Jeanne

¹ Mother Louise de Jésus (Madame de Jourdain), a widow lady and one of the secular foundresses of the Carmelites in France. She entered the Order upon its establishment in that country. In 1606 she was elected Prioress of the Monastery of Dijon, the first Frenchwoman to whom this charge was given. ("Chroniques de l'Ordre des Carmelites à France."—Tome I, p. 140.)

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Charlotte to visit her little god-daughter, Charlotte, whom she had not seen for four years.¹

Though habitually left in the background in her father's house, which position she most willingly accepted amidst his undesirable guests, this was not always the case, for Madame de Chantal, having chosen her as sponsor to her child, shows that upon the rare occasions when visitors of another calibre came to Vellerot the younger girl was not overlooked and the aching solitude of heart from which she habitually suffered was, for the nonce, relieved.

Without delay, Jeanne set out, having upon this occasion experienced no difficulty from her family in accepting the invitation. As she drove to Monthelon the distinct answer she had received to her prayer awakened in her new life. It was winter—the depth of winter—the close of the year 1607; but because her heart was glad no spring nor summer ever appeared to her half so fair and beautiful as the glittering white frost on the bare-branched trees, and the fathomless blue of the sky above. Nature, so heedless of our moods, seemed, she thought, that afternoon all heedful of her; the very keenness of the cold air shared with her its invigorating elasticity. It was one of those moments when the presence of God around us and within us makes us feel that it is good to live, and yet no fulfilment had there been of any desire so far in her life, and she had reached full womanhood. Her past had been

¹ As Mademoiselle de Bréchart was nearly related to M. d'Anlezy, who shared with her the sponsorship of Charlotte, and who four years previously accidentally killed his friend, the Baron de Chantal, while out shooting, she possibly shrank after this terrible event from visiting his widow.

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one of severe self-suppression. But by a wonderful Providence her baneful upbringing resulted neither in the egotism that delights in a melancholy species of self-abnegation, nor in that antithesis of the same vice, the all-absorbing thirst for self-expression, either form being equally opposed to the altruistic ideal now vaguely forming itself in the mind of Jeanne Charlotte de Bréhard. So, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, what might have been fatal to the formation of her character did but give strength, reticence, and beauty to it.

CHAPTER VII

VOCATION

JEANNE CHARLOTTE expanded in the congenial atmosphere of her new surroundings like a plant that has been removed from noxious soil. She breathed freely at Monthelon. No self-suppression was needed in her intercourse with Madame de Chantal, in whom she found a worthy object upon which to bestow her affections. But with the expansion other facets revealed themselves in her character, and the defects of her virtues soon became apparent.

On her arrival her hostess gave her the welcome news that the Carmelite Mothers wished for a personal interview before receiving her. Madame de Chantal, however, did not introduce Jeanne to the nuns, though she kept her more than three months at Monthelon. Some preliminary training she no doubt perceived to be desirable. No one until now had taken sufficient interest in this poor girl to point out to her those defects and shortcomings so plain to the eyes of others, but of which she herself was unconscious. When such is our lot great spiritual progress may, indeed, be made, for the Spirit breatheth where He will, but external defects which have grown with our growth usually cling to us, and are not quickly or easily shaken off. So it was with Jeanne. Though possessed of many a noble

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trait she had, we are told, at this time no lack of faults. But now God had found her a friend in the person of Madame de Chantal to whom, apparently, she gave her full confidence. This friend it is who tells us that Jeanne was emotional and quickly moved by her affections. Allied to this disposition was a certain rigidity of character—no unusual combination—a fault not, indeed, to be perceived in her intercourse with those who captivated her heart or her intellect; but in her ordinary dealings, business, or otherwise, she held to what she considered just and the rights of the case in a somewhat too tenacious manner, notably, as we shall see later on, in the account of the foundation of Riom. More than once St. Francis or St. Chantal bade her remember *summum jus summa injuria*.¹

It is interesting and edifying to observe that in her home life her action was the very converse to this, and in years to come, whenever she considered it gave greater glory to God to yield, she did so without hesitation, for such was the only motive from which she wished to act. Ignorant, and uneducated on many points, of an ardent and loving nature, which sorrow had long since taught her with its own masterful hand to curb, this self-disciplined, clever girl, with all her angles and paradoxes of character must have been an interesting study to the woman, some ten years her senior, with whom she now came in contact and who was henceforth to influence her life. As the days went by Jeanne was ever learning new things, and urged by her more enlightened conscience she soon asked to make a general confession. She longed by the absolving power of the

¹ "The extreme of justice is the extreme of injustice."

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Sacrament to rid herself of the incubus of sin, of the deficiencies and imperfections, were they of malice or of ignorance, of her past life, that she might make her way unimpeded towards new possibilities now opening before her. She was learning that mere sad occurrences, however bitterly pressed into one's life, become, in the designs of God, as the precipitate paths of her own Burgundian hills, means more quickly to reach the summit that yields a new and clearer horizon ; that this world's gospel of success is usually heaven's gospel of failure, that "humility alone will be considered when the servants of God come to be placed in their degree of excellence."¹

From the time of her general confession Jeanne communicated on all Sundays and Festivals, and on her return home she continued this practice notwithstanding the unreasonable opposition of her family. Early in the following year Madame de Chantal, braving the displeasure of M. de Bréchard, visited Vellerot, and carried off his daughter to Dijon. There Jeanne now entered the Carmelite Convent as a postulant, at the beginning of Lent, 1608. Before Easter she had fallen ill, and the nuns reluctantly parted with her. Her delicate health altogether unfitted her for their manner of life. Just at this moment Madame de Chantal was called to Monthelon, so she left the invalid to the care of the Ursulines and of Madame la Présidente Brulart, whose good nursing soon restored her to health. No sooner had she recovered than she presented herself once more at Carmel, begging to be permitted another trial of her vocation, but the Carmelite Mothers did not consider

¹ St. Francis de Sales.

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it justifiable further to risk her health. Old M. Frémyot, who lived at Dijon, being full of sympathy for the poor girl in this new disappointment, took her with him to his daughter, Madame de Chantal, whom he was about to visit at Monthelon.

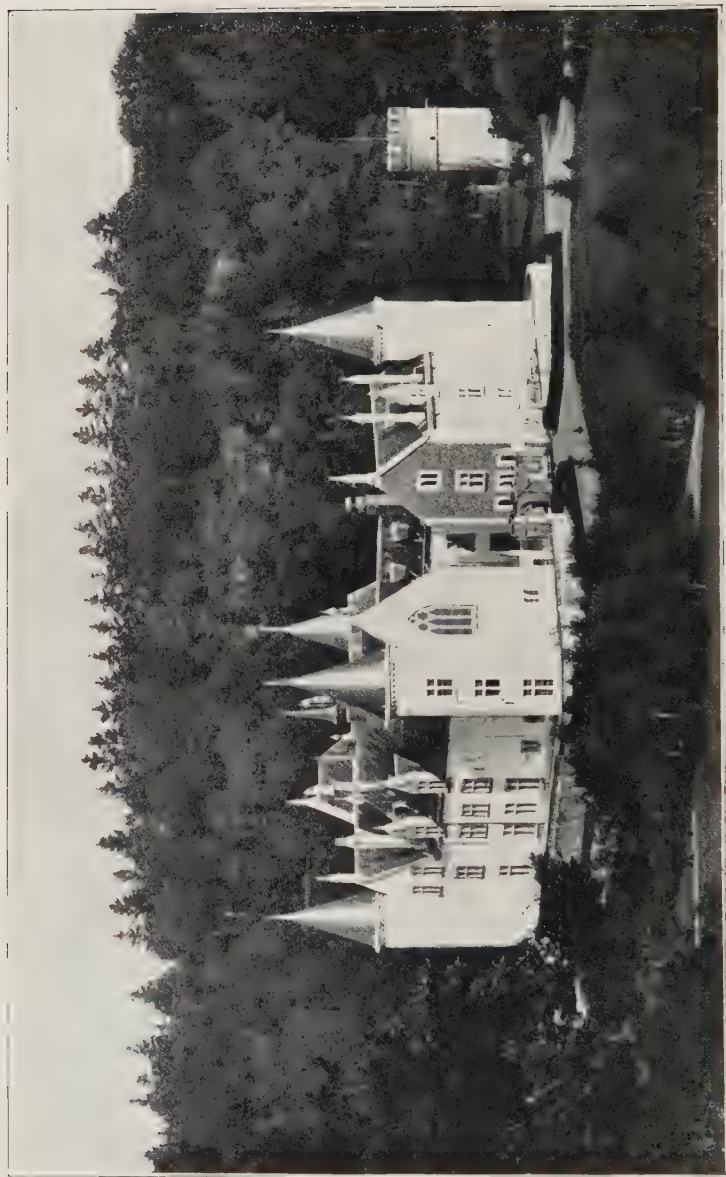
It was probably when at Monthelon that Jeanne Charlotte received in sleep what she looked upon as another intimation of the will of God. The stimulus from her first dream was still influencing her when the second came as a complement to it. To regard these dreams as more than dreams might somewhat tax our credulity, were it not that they are so entirely symbolic of her future career. And even in dreamland, as we have already had occasion to remark, when the soul of the dreamer is filled with the thought of God's love and how to make Him a generous return, our very dreams fall under the law of love, and are often sequences or elucidations of our waking desires. So was it with Jeanne Charlotte. She tells us that she dreamt she entered a church in which were two crosses of equal height, but otherwise their proportions were very dissimilar. Within the door she encountered the first; it was of white stone, a great cross, strong and large in all its proportions. Going up to it, thinking it must be meant for her, she heard a voice clearly saying: "That cross is not for thee, go up higher." She did so, and there, near the high altar, stood the other cross which she had not until then perceived. It, too, was fair to look upon, but of slender proportions. As she put her arms around it to make it her own, the voice spoke once more these words: "This is the cross which in My love I have prepared for thee; it will lead

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thee to as great perfection as if thou didst carry the heavier cross." The memory of this grace came back so vividly to Mother Jeanne Charlotte one day as she sat with her daughters that she told them how sweet the thought had ever been to her, and that now, eight-and-twenty years after, the dream was as clear to her as it had been on the morning that followed it. For a vision to her, as to every true Celt, was no impracticable hallucination, no vague fancy, but "something that holds seed and bears fruit"—that demands a new effort in life. This is how she interpreted it to her listeners: "This cross," she said, "I clearly see signified our beloved Institute, wherein, relieved of the burden of great bodily austerities, too heavy for weak shoulders, the soul can arrive at the highest perfection; for inward austerities, by which worldly and useless desires are suppressed and the affections of the heart mortified, are no less fruitful of divine love than are exterior penances."

Seeing that she never wavered in her desire to give herself to God despite the difficulties that beset her path, her friends now recommended her to join the Benedictines of Puy d'Orbe. Jeanne prayed earnestly for guidance in regard to this suggestion, but the more she prayed the less inclined she felt to give herself to God in that house. Yet the proposal somewhat disturbed her, and not until she had met the holy Bishop of Geneva, who was at this time commissioned by the Pope to reform the said monastery, did she recover peace and tranquillity.

On August 24, 1608, he came over from Mont Cenis to spend a couple of days at Monthelon with Madame de Chantal, and Jeanne Charlotte took advantage of the



THE CHÂTEAU DE BOURBILLY

From Lady Laura Ridding's 'Life of Sophia Matilda Palmer.' (John Murray)

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opportunity to unburden her mind. From this interview she received that comfort and strength which it was the privilege of this great servant of God throughout his life to bestow. "My daughter," he said to her, after he had heard her story, "would you be content to run the same race as Madame de Chantal?" It was a happiness, she replied, for which she had not dared to hope. "Well then, my daughter," said the holy Bishop, "be at peace and think no more of anything save of loving God, Whose will it is that you should belong entirely to Him." The following morning as St. Francis was elevating the Sacred Host at Mass Jeanne felt urged to make a vow of chastity. After Mass she wrote out her vow and asked the Bishop to set the seal of his approval to it by signing it and to keep it for her. He did so, assuring her that he believed she was chosen by our Lord to share and help in the life which God by means of him was pointing out to Madame de Chantal. So did her first dream come true.

While still at Monthelon or Bourbilly¹ she received a message from M. de Bréhard to say that, thinking that she had become a nun, he had disinherited her, and had made his elder daughter his sole heiress, and that now he wished Jeanne Charlotte to return home in order to ratify the contract. Without a word of expostulation or protest at this flagrant injustice she returned to Vellerot, and with the utmost docility signed the contract. During her sojourn with this unnatural

¹ Monthelon was the residence of M. de Chantal, Madame de Chantal's father-in-law, where she frequently sojourned; Bourbilly was her own home. Both were in the Province of Bourbonnais, about three leagues apart.

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parent how it must have cheered her to receive such letters as the following:—

“ ANNECY, *Mid-May*.

“ So now, my dear niece,¹ you are at home again with your father who is to you as it were a living image of the Eternal Father. This is why we owe honour and service to those whom God has made the authors of our being. Keep your soul well in hand so as not to let it escape on either side. I mean neither let it become too tender amidst the affections of relatives nor too much worried by their passions and the diversity of humours with which we are obliged to put up. Most certainly I can well believe that you were in great sorrow at leaving your dear mother,² for she too tells me that she greatly felt the parting; but one day, please God, you shall no more be separated. While awaiting that day let us remain absolutely in His holy love. That M—— is indeed to me a wonder! He tells you that you cannot communicate unless you hear Mass. Not only is such an opinion without reason, but without a vestige of sense. As, however, you must submit to him, make spiritual communions all the more frequently, for these no one can refuse you. God wishes, my dear niece, to wean you and make you eat solid food, or rather I should say dry bread, for more solid food there cannot be in heaven or on earth than Holy Communion. But this refusal, which is all the harder to you because of your desire for His holy love, requires that aspirations towards God be

¹ Seeing the motherly affection that Madame de Chantal lavished upon Mademoiselle de Bréchar d, the Bishop told her he looked upon her as his niece, and gave her this pet name.

² Madame de Chantal, upon whom she looked as a second mother.

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all the more strenuous. I write in haste, my dear niece and daughter, and I beg of our Lord to be always in your heart.”¹

A few days later he writes again : “ I wrote to you the other day, but I must needs satisfy my heart by writing again to-day, so that you may at least have this proof, that whenever I can find time I send you a letter, so affectionately do I bear you in mind. Live altogether in our Lord, my dear daughter. Let this be the water in which your soul swims. Those who walk on a rope hold a pole in their hands in order to keep their balance in the various movements they make on so dangerous a foothold, in like manner should you firmly hold the cross of our Lord in order to walk safely amidst the variety of perils that surround you, and the conversations that disturb you, so that all your movements may be balanced by the incomparable and sweet will of God to which you have consecrated both your body and your heart. . . . À Dieu, very dear niece ! Always look upon me with much affection as the one man in the world who most desires to see you in the enjoyment of true and solid consolations. I do indeed wish you the abundance of divine love which is and will be eternally the one thing of value to our hearts. He who has given all for us has given us this.

“ Very sincerely yours, my dear daughter,
“ ✠ FRANCIS, BISHOP OF GENEVA.”²

¹ “ Œuvres,” Tome XIV ; Lettres Vol. IV, pp. 160-1.

² *Ibid.* pp. 164-5.

CHAPTER VIII

DAYS OF PREPARATION

JEANNE CHARLOTTE passed the interval that elapsed from the time she left Carmel to the establishment of the Bishop's new Institute between her father's house and that of Madame de Chantal. Since the marriage of his elder daughter M. de Brécharde appears to have wished for the company of his other child and at times to have resented her frequent absences from home. Upon such occasions Madame de Chantal would herself bring back her visitor, and then out of pity of the girl exact a promise that she should be soon allowed to return to her. Experience of the household at Monthelon, where her own father-in-law was in the hands of an unscrupulous servant, had taught Madame de Chantal how much under such circumstances a daughter can be made to suffer.

During one of these absences from home the tongue of calumny was not idle. Would-be kind friends told M. de Brécharde that Jeanne was doing her best to get married, so as to reassert her claim to her lawful inheritance. This they persuaded him was the real reason for her attraction for Bourbilly, and not, as she alleged, facilities for practising her religion. Weak and vacillating, he easily gave credence to these tales, and when next his child returned home he treated her with the

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greatest unkindness. As in the past, Jeanne Charlotte bore this persecution without apparent resentment, simply expressing her conviction that her perseverance would in time prove that it was God and not the world she sought. A little while after this M. de Bréhard fell out with his son-in-law, whereupon, repenting of the contract he had made, he urged his youngest daughter to retract her consent to it, protesting that he himself now regretted it, and wished to cancel the deed. But Jeanne had no desire for this world's goods, and while thanking her father assured him that if he would but give her a small dowry she had no wish to deprive her sister of the riches that had now been settled upon her. However, in keeping with his previous behaviour, M. de Bréhard neither made any settlement upon her nor gave her any portion whatsoever. To resign herself to this pecuniary dependence was no easy matter to a naturally high-spirited girl, and she suffered keenly. But her indomitable will made her bear it, not only with resignation, but even with apparent cheerfulness. Beneath the cross she clearly saw the hand of her heavenly Lover offering her the better gift of humility in exchange for her love of independence. This failure of duty on the part of M. de Bréhard secured, in God's designs, the foundation of the new Institute in the blessed virtue of poverty, with only the paternal hand of Providence to support it.

As we have seen, the Visitation came to birth at Annecy on Trinity Sunday, 1610. On Monday of the previous Passion Week Madame de Chantal left Dijon accompanied by Mademoiselle de Bréhard and by her two daughters, Marie Aimée, who had been recently

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married to Bernard, Baron de Thorens, the youngest brother of St. Francis, and Françoise de Chantal. As the party neared its destination a cavalcade might have been seen trotting up the mountain road; it was some thirty gentlemen of the neighbourhood, headed by the young Baron de Thorens, who had come to do honour to a woman who was about to leave home, and friends, and lands to lead a life of sacrifice for the propitiation of sin, and who had chosen this valley amidst the mountains wherein to hide herself from the world. On meeting the little party the horsemen drew rein to salute, and turning, escorted it to Annecy, Bernard de Thorens riding beside his child-wife.¹ It was the morning of Palm Sunday. If those were days when the sins of the world cried loudly for lives of expiation (but where are the days in which they do not?), they were, too, what is lost to the world now, days of faith and chivalry. In them it was as impossible to let an approved pious project, an act of heroic self-immolation, pass unhonoured, as in our day it would be difficult to awaken any similar manifestation of esteem.

After Easter, Madame de Chantal, again accompanied by Mademoiselle de Bréchard, took Marie Aimée de Thorens to the Château de Sales and remained there some weeks. Bernard de Thorens, brimming over as he was with youth and gaiety, appears, in his desire to entertain his guests, to have sometimes seasoned his pleasant conversation with witticisms that Mademoiselle de Bréchard did not always relish. One day we are told, regardless of conventionalities, she checked him in the recital of some amusing story and bade him speak of

¹ Marie Aimée was at this time about twelve years of age.

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something more profitable. There were moments when she, whose life had been one long struggle with suffering and misfortune, could not rise to the little froth of merriment with which the holy Bishop so well knew how to play.¹ There is, however, no evidence that she was lacking in a sense of humour, but she had not yet learnt how to finger the flageolet, nor, like St. Francis, how to throw the perfumes he so deftly dispersed : how, in other words, to make piety attractive, and capture the gift of cheerfulness for the service of her Master. The young Baron was equal to the occasion, and, being as good as he was light-hearted, courteously turned the conversation, begging of Mademoiselle de Bréhard to expound to him a certain passage in holy Scripture, which she did, it is related, with admirable lucidity.

On May 29, the two friends returned to Annecy, where Mademoiselle Jacqueline Favre joined them. Her

¹ In one of his familiar conferences to his spiritual daughters at Annecy, St. Francis says : "I sometimes play the barber, and at other times the surgeon. Do you not see when I preach in the choir before seculars that, like the barber, I hurt no one? I only scatter perfumes. I only speak of virtues and of things calculated to comfort souls. I play a little on the flageolet, speaking of the praises we give to God ; but in our familiar conferences I come in the capacity of surgeon, bringing nothing but plaisters and poultices to apply to the wounds of my dear daughters, and although they cry out, I still keep pressing my hand to make the plaster hold better and so to cure them. If I make an incision, my daughters feel the pain of it, but I do not mind : it is for this that I am here. Worldlings cannot understand, owing to their erroneous conception of us, that religious and those who are vowed to perfection can have any imperfection. But here amongst ourselves, my dear daughters, we know very well that this is impossible, and therefore we are not afraid of scandalising one another by speaking freely of our little defects."—"Spiritual Conferences." Translated from the Annecy Text of 1895, supervised by Abbot Gasquet and the late Canon Mackey, O.S.B. London, Burns and Oates, 1906 : "Conference on Antipathies," p. 297.)

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father, President Favre, Governor of Savoy, was a jurist of European fame, and her brother was the distinguished grammarian, Vaugelas. Jacqueline comes down to us as a muse of the Renaissance. She had studied literature with her brothers, and had besides a reputation as a marvellously graceful dancer in days when dancing was an art. These accomplishments, combined with a distinguished appearance and with independence of character, won her much admiration; in them she revelled until, at the age of twenty-one, St. Francis awakened her soul to higher ambitions, and those of earth lost their charm for her.

There is an amusing story told of these intervening first days of June. Mademoiselle de Bréchart being possessed of a certain skill in the craft of dressmaking had made a simple and unpretentious robe for each of the three aspirants to religious life. The favourable criticism of her two companions encouraged her to seek the Bishop's approval, so, rolling up the dress into a bundle, she set off for the episcopal palace. On arriving at the door a deaf mute, to whom St. Francis's charity extended and who lived in his house, happened to be standing in the street. Jeanne seized the opportunity of pressing him into her service because he could tell no tales, for there was much curiosity afloat about the Bishop's ladies. In a few moments the boy stood before his Lordship attired in the new robe; the Bishop expressed his approval, the lad was dismissed and Jeanne began to talk about other matters. Meanwhile the holy Bishop, who, St. Chantal tells us, heartily enjoyed a joke, looking out of the window, saw a crowd gathering in the street below in the centre of which the mute was to be

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seen having his hour. By a fine piece of dumb acting and eloquent gesticulations, he was making known the distinction that had been conferred upon him, to an inquisitive and admiring audience. Do what they would these holy women could not keep their secret to themselves.

CHAPTER IX

EARLY DAYS

THE reader is already familiar with the Saint's difficulties in procuring La Galerie. These once happily disposed of, the sisters took possession of the little house and St. Francis straightway appointed Madame de Chantal superior ; while to Mademoiselle de Bréchart he gave the charge of business affairs and the arrangement of the house : Jeanne Charlotte's gift of organisation soon made itself felt, and a small convent with suitable apartments for conventual and household occupations was the result.

In a short time La Galerie began to be peopled with young girls, most of whom were spiritual children of St. Francis, and year by year their numbers continued rapidly to increase.

The good Mother was at this time in very delicate health, more than once she fell dangerously ill. During these illnesses Sister de Bréchart had the opportunity she longed for of proving her devotedness. Almost everything was in her hands, and it was her delight to spend herself on others. The only form of selfishness that she apparently possessed was this of keeping all the burden upon her own shoulders when others wished to share it.

At the end of the year of novitiate the first three

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members made their profession. We are not given any special details of Jeanne Charlotte's novitiate, beyond the telling facts revealed to us in a manifestation of God's dealings with her soul, made in later years at St. Chantal's request. Therein she says that during the whole year no distraction ever troubled her and no wandering thought ever took full possession of her mind. Nothing seemed capable of turning her attention from God, not even when fatigued by several hours spent in prayer ; so completely and continuously did she live in His holy presence. On all things divine her companions considered that she spoke with the clearness and intelligence of an Angel, yet she says of herself that God's communications of His greatness, of His goodness, of His love for us poor creatures remained sealed within her breast, because she could find neither words nor simile to make them known. "They see not clearliest who see all things clear."¹

For some five years the sisters visited the sick poor in their homes ; and later, in the year 1618, they were formally erected into an Order, by Bull of Pope Paul V, with observance of strict enclosure.

St. Francis made this change in his congregation at the instigation of Mgr. de Marquemont, Archbishop of Lyons. Union with God by means of the interior, contemplative life had been his ideal for the Visitation, but he had intended his daughters likewise to practise some corporal work of mercy. For this end two sisters were each month appointed to visit the sick poor ; but they were not to devote more than two hours a day to this holy object. In a community of twenty-four professed sisters each

¹ G. K. Chesterton.

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would thus have her turn of nursing one month in the year.¹

There are quaint and pleasing anecdotes left us of those early days when the sisters were not yet enclosed, just one of which we will give our readers, as it exemplifies the familiar intercourse of the Saint with his spiritual children. Sister Marie Adrienne Fichet tells us that on a certain day, as she and Sister Favre were passing the episcopal residence, one of the Bishop's servants asked them to come in. They did so and found the Saint in bed with a wound on his leg. "My dear Daughters," he said to them, "you are on your way to dress the wounds of the poor invalids, and here is one who has a wound on his leg. Will you have the charity to dress it for him?" Then he desired the dressings to be fetched and he removed the bandage. Both sisters set eagerly to work, but what with nervousness and pleasure at such a distinction falling to them, whatever skill they possessed in less honourable circumstances deserted them, their hands trembled, and in their anxiety to give no pain they gave the poor patient a great deal. He bore it all and made no remark until they had finished; then he said: "When you dress the wounds of the poor, my dear Daughters, be very careful not to let your hand shake and don't be in such a hurry; for when the raw flesh is roughly handled it causes great pain." Now Sister Jeanne Charlotte was an expert at dressing

¹ Speaking of this change St. Chantal says: "Only the first professed, not the novices, were allowed to go out of the Convent to perform these exercises of charity. But quite suddenly we found ourselves completely changed and possessed of a desire for enclosure in accordance with the resolve our Blessed Father had made, as is set down in the manuscript." ("The Spirit of St. Chantal as shown in her Letters." Longmans, 1922. "Letter to Père Rivière," No. 550, p. 123.)

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wounds, and when the sisters came home and related their adventure she simply longed to make use of her skill to relieve their holy Father. She asked him to let her come to dress his leg. Her request drew from him the following little note : "No, my Daughter, even if *ma Mère* should bring you I would not receive you, however consoling it might be to me or however much your remedies might relieve me. For although the guilelessness of the hearts of Father and Daughter hath no need in its candour of such reserve or of such due barriers of circumspection, yet the Father ought not to be visited by his Daughter, nay, not even by his dear Mother, unless a more serious illness demand it. Mother and Daughter will then pass by the house of this poor father and son without calling upon him and without seeing him. They will go straight on to visit the poor folk who are neither their fathers nor their sons, but whom they must look upon as members and brothers of Jesus Christ. Abide in peace, my dearest Daughter, until I carry my bad leg to your parlour, for I do not deny that the looks of my well-beloved Mother and the remedies of my good Daughter would be salutary to me. However, since you cannot look at this leg, give a little look at the heart of your worthless poor Father who wishes you also thousands of blessings. I salute our Sisters. M. Michel is very glad to visit my Daughters. One day we shall be all together in a glorious eternity that hath no limits, no bounds save those of its own immensity."¹

Such was the manner in which the holy Bishop made use of each trifling circumstance to educate his daughters more intimately and perfectly.

¹ "Œuvres," Tome XVI ; Lettres Vol. VI, p. 76.

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In September of the year 1610, President Frémyot died. Upon hearing of his death St. Francis, who was at the time in the Chablais, wrote to Mother de Chantal desiring her to go to Burgundy to look after the affairs of her children. During her absence Sister Jeanne Charlotte was appointed to act as Superior. This charge was most unwelcome to her and she complained to Our Lord of the responsible burden thus laid on her incompetent shoulders. But even as she made known to Him her distress her heart's ear, she tells us, heard these consoling words: "The father and the mother go away but I, Who am thy God, I stay with thee. Of what, then, hast thou to complain?" Sorrow and anxiety had fallen upon her when Mother de Chantal had placed the burden upon her shoulders, and now these blessed words strengthened her and eased its weight. Yet it soon became exceeding heavy; illness broke out in the community and one sister of great promise, Péronne Marie de Châtel, fell seriously ill. Night and day the new Mother nursed her children wholly regardless of herself, till, on St. Francis's return from the Chablais, whence he had written to encourage her, further details of her devotion and unwearied self-sacrifice evoked this tender reproach:—

"ANNECY, Oct. 29, 1611.

"MY DEAREST DAUGHTER, MY NIECE,

"They tell me that you are working altogether beyond your strength, that you have not undressed for several nights, that you eat hardly anything, that you take upon yourself all the most unpleasant and laborious work in the infirmary, and then go straight to the choir to support the chant. O my daughter, my daughter!

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I do not like you to be so valiant, for just think what our Mother will say to me if, while she is away, any harm come to her beloved Jeanne Charlotte; I shall certainly run the risk of being blamed for not taking more care of this dearest daughter. Take advice from your poor Father, and allow yourself sufficient rest and sufficient food. Do not try to carry away all the crowns, but in your love for the sisters leave some for them. That holy love which urges you with such energy to do everything yourself ought also to hold you back, so that others may have the consolation of doing their part. God will be good to us. I hope He is only threatening and does not mean to strike, and that our Mother's dear Péronne will come to meet her on her arrival in company with her most dear Lieutenant. My beloved daughter, I should like to see you ardent yet gentle, fervent yet moderate, and always looking to good results from these illnesses as from all things, not because of your own exertions, but because of the loving goodness of your Spouse. May He for ever bless you and all our absent Mother's children. Though absent, she is always present in our hearts in the sight of Him who is all in all to both Mother and Daughters. May He be all things likewise to your Father. Beg this of Him, so that this blessed equality of graces may reign in our poor dear little Visitation.—Amen.”¹

While Mother de Chantal was away in Burgundy she left Françoise at La Galerie, where the nuns were educating her. For her amusement we hear of their having caught a sparrow as a playmate for the child. But very soon it was not only Françoise that played with

¹ “Œuvres,” Tome XV ; Lettres Vol. V, p. 112.

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the sparrow ! So one day an unknown hand released the bird and it could be found no more. A sister accosted the new Mother with inquiries about the sparrow, but another sister put her finger to her lips as a signal that silence was advisable. However, the sparrow was soon succeeded by a squirrel, and it too proved to have more playmates than Françoise, so the squirrel disappeared in the same unaccountable manner. Yet for all her strict ways Mother de Bréhard was kind-hearted, and after the release of the squirrel she was to be seen busily constructing a wonderful Paradise wherein angels hovered in mid-air attached by threads of horsehair and clothed in gorgeous robes. The Paradise was such a success that St. Francis brought all his household to see it, and when they came home he asked them what they thought of it. So enthusiastic was their praise of the angels that the holy Bishop feared lest his daughters might amuse themselves in admiring these blessed spirits instead of giving their thoughts to the Lord of Angels in the tabernacle. After this incident he inserted these words in the Constitutions : "No dolls shall be made throughout the house, still less shall any be placed on the altar to represent Our Lord or Our Lady or the angels or anything whatsoever." Henceforth the angels were Françoise's sole property, and Mother de Bréhard's talents in this direction were restricted to the little girl's entertainment.

CHAPTER X

VISITATION MYSTICS

ASCETICISM in its commonly accepted form, that of bodily austerity, was not, as we have seen, to be a rule or general custom in St. Francis's Congregation. But that more subtle aspect of the virtue, the repudiation of pure, honourable, undefiled human joys for the sake of a higher blessedness was essential to its spirit. This severest of self-restraints St. Francis laid down for his daughters, and when God gave them, as He hastened to do, the fruit of their sacrifice even here on earth, St. Chantal besought Him to reserve it for eternity. God heard her petition, as we shall now see.

As early as the year 1612 visible and striking demonstrations of God's graces were beginning to draw attention to the community of La Galerie. Sister Anne Marie Rosset, who had but just entered, Sister Jeanne Charlotte de Bréhard, and many of their companions were the recipients of very exceptional spiritual favours.

No little anxiety was thereby caused to the Founders of the Institute, who wished humility to be its characteristic and prevailing spirit—a humility hidden from the world and from self. To quote Mgr. de Maupas :¹

¹ The real author of this life of St. Jane Frances de Chantal was Mother Hélène Angélique Lhuillier, who asked and obtained permission from Mgr. de Maupas, Bishop of Puy, to substitute his name as author for her own in the title page. In quoting from it we shall in future use her name. It was published in 1644.

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“Several of the sisters were raised to the prayer of quiet, of loving repose, and of holy union; others Our Lord favoured with a sublime knowledge of the divine mysteries, some had frequent ecstasies in which they received great and unusual graces from God.” In his preface to the “Treatise on the Love of God,” St. Francis says, “The communications received from the Visitation Sisters on their inward life with God form a portion of this work.”

Speaking to one in whom she had confidence of the first happy days of the Congregation, St. Chantal gives the following account of a petition she made to God for the cessation of these miraculous manifestations.

She says: “Upon seeing that the miraculous graces with which these dear souls were so wonderfully favoured were beginning to be noised abroad and to excite admiration I felt impelled to ask God to keep us in our lowliness. Those words, ‘Your life is hid with Christ in God,’ kept recurring to my mind. Our Blessed Father had wished them to be inserted in the ceremonial of our profession, and to him I went in my trouble. He bade me speak to the Jesuit Father de Bonival. I did so, saying that I felt urged to ask God from henceforth to lead all the daughters of the Visitation by a life obscure, unknown, and insignificant in the eyes of creatures. In a word, that if such were His good pleasure our sisters should be hidden in Him with His Son Jesus Christ who was crucified for love of us. Both our Blessed Father and Père de Bonival approved of my desire and said Holy Mass for my intention. I received Holy Communion at that of our Blessed Father and made my thanksgiving while Père de Bonival said his.

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As this great servant of God was communicating, my mind became so strongly and vividly illuminated that it appeared to me to exclude all doubt that the Most Holy Trinity had not only heard, but heard with pleasure, our united prayer, and the great gift of an inward hidden life—a life of love and suffering with Jesus Christ should be ours. This was not all, I saw, too, that in His magnanimity God would in no wise retrench the graces He had prepared for those faithful to Him in the little Congregation, but that these graces should be (taking into account our nothingness) in a measure like unto the graces of the Son of God, and hidden in Him, their manifestation being reserved for eternity : that if at times external favours and marvels manifested themselves in certain souls it would be in order to pay homage in a symbolic manner to the mystery of the Transfiguration of Our Lord and to His miracles of grace. When we met after Mass it was a true consolation to me to find that we all three had experienced the same inward illumination. Our Holy Founder then assured us that God willed the members of the Congregation to be the adorers and the imitators of the lowly estate of His divine Son and of His life of perfection wholly hidden in God, yet to the eyes of the world quite commonplace and ordinary. Therefrom we drew occasion for a thousand acts of thanksgiving to His infinite Goodness.” Thus spoke the holy Mother, and Mother Lhuillier continues : “Experience each day justifies her words and verifies her intimate understanding of the spiritual path of the daughters of the Visitation, proving that she was supernaturally enlightened. All those who have had the direction of the sisters concur in the opinion that they

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are universally attracted to a perfectly simple and unconditional surrender of themselves into the hands of God, by a life hidden from the eyes of men but of inward strength and absolute detachment from all things.¹

Looking back on the history of the Order to the days when, in 1644, Mother Lhuillier wrote the above lines, a marvellous continuity and consistency of spirit and of type is manifest throughout. Year after year, century after century, with rare exceptions, the common things, the daily drudgery of the life alone met the eye of man, yet was each soul given the power and the training to transmute and sublimate her most menial duties or occupations—to “make drudgery divine.”²

The covenant with heaven by which the Founders relinquished the rare spiritual privileges with which God had been favouring their daughters and the acceptance of this surrender on the part of God appear to have in no way impeded the giving of the good gift. Meanwhile the hidden life became more hidden, and the type of prayer known as that of *simple regard en Dieu* is clearly manifest in the intimate communication of the sisters with their Superiors. We will let them speak for themselves. “All I do,” writes Mother Anne Marie Rosset, explaining to St. Chantal her manner of prayer, “is to keep my spirit absolutely and unalterably directed towards God by an inward gaze or loving attention (*simple regard en Dieu*). I do naught else either in the time of prayer

¹ Saudreau : “Les Tendresses du Seigneur pour une âme fidèle,” ou “Vie de la Mère Anne-Marguérite Clément.” Paris, C. Amat, rue Cassette VI, Appendice I, pp. 508 *sqq.*

² George Herbert.

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or out of the time of prayer. As the great feasts and solemnities of the Church come round my thoughts dwell not on them,¹ nor do they dwell on eternity, nor on death, nor on the judgment of God, nor on anything that carries my mind to Him. . . . When some thought or remembrance occurs to me, which is very rarely, I obliterate it by this simple gaze. If it should please God to favour me with some great light or knowledge, which He never does, I believe I should not stop to look at it but go to Him, keeping my spirit always simply detached. When He makes me feel His sacred presence more sensibly and with more suavity, as sometimes happens, I do not linger to enjoy the feeling, to taste, relish, or reflect upon it in order to plunge more deeply into it, but I keep myself there always just looking at Him, leaving the doing of all things to Him, referring all to, and submerging all in, this loving intentness (*simple regard*) on Him. This takes place without any image or representation whatsoever, for such it could not endure. It casts aside all that is not God to make room for Him. It is not even conscious of how it comes into contact with Him, nor in what manner it enjoys Him, nor how it occupies itself with Him. It is enough that He on whom my gaze is concentrated knows, and that He knows, too, all that is taking place in my soul while it is occupied with Him. The soul on its part has

¹ This degree of simplicity is very unusual and more admirable than imitable. We shall see, in speaking of Mother de Bréchart's prayer, how peculiarly susceptible she was to the religious influences, be it joy or sorrow, occasioned by the Feasts of the Church, the object of such feasts being not only to glorify God, but likewise to refresh and strengthen us by the great truths and mysteries they bring home to us throughout the Christian Year.

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nothing to do save to keep lovingly intent on Him, and to receive what He gives. As soon as it finds itself wandering it has but quickly to bring the mind back to this simple presence of God. When the soul, together with all its powers and faculties, has absolutely and wholly surrendered itself and hidden itself in the divine abyss it becomes lost in God, to live no more its own life but to be absorbed in Him, so that He may live in it. . . . It is for Him then to live, to act, to work in this soul absolutely as He pleases.”¹

Truly did Mother Rosset exemplify that life of love of which St. Francis thus speaks. “Love,” he says, “upon entering into a soul makes it happily die to self that it may live to God. It frees her of all human desires, all self-esteem, than which the skin does not cling more closely to the flesh of the body than it to the spirit. And, finally, love strips the soul of all affection to spiritual consolations, to devotional exercises, nay even to her own advancement in perfection, which till now she treasured as her very life. For the same God who inspired her with these desires now makes her regardless of them, that she may, with the more tranquillity, purity, and simplicity, care for naught save His good pleasure. Then when her self-renouncement is complete He reclothes her to His liking, and with, it may be, the very affections she has relinquished. But the reclothing is simply to make herself pleasing to her Spouse, and no longer in any way to content the love she bears herself. So is it with her who gives up parents, country, home, friends, to clothe herself in the garments becoming to the spouse of

¹ “Vie,” par la Mère Marie Aimée de Rabutin, 1667, p. 7 ; see Saudreau, “Vie de la Mère A. M. Clement,” Appendice, pp. 113-16.

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her Saviour. All these things she henceforth loves solely because her Saviour's Name is sanctified therein. His kingdom advanced, His good pleasure glorified. So is *love strong as death* to make us quit all, but it is glorious as the Resurrection in adorning us with honour and glory."¹

Yet one more privileged soul we cannot refrain from introducing to the reader, being the thirty-fourth religious of the Institute. On Trinity Sunday, 1617, St. Francis introduced Mademoiselle Margu rite Cl ment to Mother de Chantal : her whom he looked upon as his Benjamin, because she was the youngest that came to him in his advancing years and, it is said, though we think erroneously, the last he professed. One day, singling her out from amongst the sisters, he whispered to Mother de Chantal, "There is a true virgin, a genuine spouse of Jesus Christ."

Speaking of her own inward path Mother Cl ment says : "He who is goodness itself has not cast off His guilty servant, for He has allowed me to experience the sweet effects of His presence. He has inebriated me with such an abundance of consolations that anything that is not God or pertaining to Him is utterly insipid to me. He so gently and so powerfully inundates me with His sweetness that I feel lost in the vast ocean of His divinity. Each and every occurrence serves to detach me from myself and to transform me into Him. I am conscious of another spirit ruling mine—a spirit that directs all according to its own designs, and with supreme authority captivates all the powers of my soul. Whether I will or no, it reduces them to obedience,

¹ "Traite de l'Amour de Dieu," Livre IX, chap. 16.

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and subjects my spirit to its domination. What more can I say? If I wish to reflect upon the humiliations and the torments of my crucified Spouse I am obliged to check myself, for I am only so far at liberty as to admire God's ineffable love for me and to love Him in return. The desire to suffer and to die with Him is so great that to live is inexpressibly painful to me. And I am pursued by a longing for solitude so that I may freely give vent to my tears and weep my heart out because my love for Him is so feeble, and because I see nearly everybody is indifferent to Him."¹

In order to prepare Marguérite to receive Him in Holy Communion the Lord Jesus transformed her soul into a garden of delights wherein He wished to make His pleasance. He instructed her as to the symbolism of this garden in a manner so closely resembling the inspired love song of the Scriptures, the Canticle of Canticles, that we place them side by side.

The trees of this garden, which is her heart, He told her are pious desires and holy thoughts; good works the fruit thereof, loving and contrite tears the fountain in the midst of the garden whose waters irrigate it.

The bye-paths whereon the Spouse walks are hedged in with humility, tranquillity, peace and joy. The arbour and the couch whereon the Spouse reposes are holy recollectedness, fervent, persevering and continual prayer.

My Sister, my Spouse, is a garden enclosed.—Cant. iv. 12.

Show, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou liest in the mid-day.—Cant. i. 6.

The fountain of Gardens, the well of living waters which ran with a strong stream from Libanus.—Cant. iv. 15.

While the King was at his repose, my spikenard sent forth the odour thereof.—Cant. i. 11.

¹ Saudreau, "Vie de la Mère A. M. Clément," pp. 381 *sqq.*

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Then deep down in her heart she heard Him say: "I, in whom all excellence is combined, I am thy sole, unique, supreme good . . . I, thy God, am a jealous Spouse who will suffer no rival, for it is my wish to be thy sole desire, thy sole quest, thy sole love, the sole occupant of thy soul which is all mine. I am thy God, thy Spouse, thy King."

Having thus spoken, Our Lord, to protect her against herself and to keep her humility untarnished, reproached her for her unfaithfulness. He continued: "I have been thy Spouse and thou mine, but thou wert false to thy plighted troth, and hast degraded thyself in turning away from Me to give thyself to other joys, and yet how often, alas! have I not come back and sought again to espouse thee." Upon this Marguérite, crushed by the sense of her own degradation, fell to weeping. Whereupon her Spouse, who only humbles to exalt, manifested Himself to her soul. The while from the Three adorable Persons of the Blessed Trinity she heard these words of the Canticle of Canticles: "Return, return, O Sulamitess: return that we may behold thee in thy lowliness" (Cant. vi. 12).

The Lord Jesus then spoke again: "I am the resurrection and the life," the soul that loves Me finds ease in pain. Union with Me makes what is bitter sweet to the taste. I am beyond compare life and joy to her, and I alone can slake her thirst."

To catch the little foxes that destroy the vines.—Cant. ii. 15.

I knew not my soul troubled me for the chariots of Aminadab.—Cant. vi. 11.

He hath regarded the lowliness of His handmaid.

Behold my beloved speaketh to me. . . . Arise, my love, my dove, my beautiful one, and come.—Cant. ii. 10.

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Well might she have sung with St. John of the Cross :—

“ Beloved ! Lord of mountains,
Of lonely valleys and of leafy brakes,
Lord of the gushing fountains,
The islets and the lakes,
The whispering breeze that amorous music makes.

The foxes drive away !
For, lo, our vine is breaking into flower !
A bed of roses gay
Prepare within this bower ;
Let none draw near us in this blissful hour !

Withhold thee, northern blast !
But come, thou south wind, and with wingèd feet
To my fair garden haste,
So that my Lord may eat
His Love-Feast mid fair flowers and odours sweet.”¹

Such a Sulamitess had St. Francis in mind when he wrote his “Treatise on the Love of God.” For her he intended many of its most instructive and elucidating chapters on the mystical interpretation of Holy Scripture. The following passages illustrate the exegencies of the demands of God’s love upon His elect, and throw light on His severe reproaches for what appears to have been some infidelity on the part of Mother Clément.

Dwelling on the words *I am the Lord thy God, mighty, jealous*,² *The Lord his name is Jealous*,³ St. Francis says : “What is this jealousy? Truly at first sight it seems to be a jealousy of cupidity like unto that between husband and wife, for God will have us so entirely His own that none other must share His love. *No man*, He says, *can*

¹ Stanzas from Miss Farnell’s version of one of the spiritual canticles of St. John of the Cross.

² Exod. xx. 5.

³ *Ibid.* xxxiv. 14.

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*serve two masters.*¹ He demands complete possession of heart, soul, mind, strength,² and for this reason He calls Himself our Spouse and we His. To any deflection whatsoever from this supreme love He gives the name of fornication, adultery. Thus rigorously and of good reason doth He, with authority, compel us to give Him the whole love of our heart, for ours is but a little heart, and it hath no capacity worthily to love the divine Goodness. Is it not, then, but meet that we should at least give Him such measure of love as we can have and hold, since we cannot give Him the measure that is His due? God can gain nothing by our love of Him, all the gain is ours, and so we see His jealousy of us cannot be, and is not, a jealousy of cupidity, but it is the jealousy of sovereign love. *They have forsaken Me, He says, who am the fountain of living water: they have digged to themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that hold no water;*³ while I, He seems to add, Sustain no injury thereby; for what difference does it make to a living spring if men draw not water from it? None whatever. I grieve because having left Me they have chosen for themselves wells that have no water. His desire, therefore, that we should love Him is simply for our own sakes. And we must not cease to love Him, nor let our love for Him diminish, for to do so is to take the first step to perdition, and whatever affection we refuse to give Him the same is lost."

In further consideration of this same thought the Saint

¹ Matt. vi. 24.

² Deut. vi. 5: *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul and with thy whole strength.*

³ Jeremiah ii. 13.

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continues : *Put me*, said the Divine Shepherd to the Sulamitess, *as a seal upon thy heart, as a seal upon thy arm.*¹ He is already in possession of her love, yet is He not content, but with the holy distrust that comes of jealousy He stamps His own seal upon her heart lest any portion of the love due to Him escape therefrom, or the love of aught else get entry to mingle with His love. Nor is He yet satisfied ; the quality of that love must be absolutely untainted, altogether pure, and it must be wholly, unchangeably His. Even this does not appear quite to appease this [tremendous Lover], so He puts His seal upon her right arm to secure that not only her affections but also the works of her hands may be employed in none other than His service. Now all this God demands because His love purifies the soul of all admixture and severs her from all created affections, just as death severs the soul from the body. And *His love is not only strong as death*,² but it is bitter, hard, pitiless, inexorable, in punishing any infidelity to Him ; and when it sees such a soul entertain any rival affection, then is His love as relentless as hell in punishing the damned. Even so was David punished for the one venial sin of numbering his people after he had been established in grace through perfect love.³ (See Livre X, chap. 13.)

¹ Cant. viii. 6.

² *Ibid.*

³ Addressing souls who are called to a less high degree of union St. Francis says : " We must love nothing that can remove our hearts from God. Now never does any love take our heart from His save that which is opposed to Him. . . . The divine Goodness is not offended by seeing in us other loves besides His, so long as we preserve for Him the reverence and submission that is His due. (See Livre X, chap. 3.) And again : " Souls that love other things than God, lawful things, but who, like the rich young man in the Gospel, love them in an inordinate way, still, as the things they love are lawful though they yield to an

Visitation Mystics

When Margu rite next received Holy Communion after the above favours, Jesus Christ, in preparation for it, spoke within her soul and told her that He was truly in all places, but in a special way in the hearts of those who held themselves attentive to His presence, in order to operate therein with the same fruitful graces as He operates in His elect in heaven. And these words she understood Him then to say: "My eyes are ever watching thee, My ears attentive to thee, My heart open therein to hide thee and to love thee. And in like manner do I with all those who live in My presence: I fill them with My graces as far as their capacity can bear."

"Give what Thou wilt without Thee we are poor,
And rich with Thee take what Thou wilt away."¹

Such was the path by which not only Mothers de Br chard, Rosset, and Cl ment, but numberless other Visitandines were drawn to close and constant union with God and tranquil repose in His divine Goodness. It justifies the end for which St. Francis said he had instituted his Order: "That there might be creatures who should love God"; and it warrants for them the title by which he loved to designate them: "Daughters of Divine Love." For when a soul is said to walk in mystic ways of divine love it is not to be implied that

undue affection in their manner of loving them, yet conscious of this excess in themselves they love it not, such souls are entitled to the favours of the heavenly Solomon, but they do not enjoy these favours in the quality of spouses, because they love that out of God and without God which they ought not to love but in Him and for Him." (Livre X, chap. 4.)

¹ Cowper.

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she is dreamy, emotional, caught in the meshes of a highly-wrought imagination, but just simply that God has chosen her, taken her apart for a more intimate and loving union with Himself and that she has responded to His call.¹

Of the many who stretch out towards Him she attains to Him beyond all others. Her secret unrevealed, she yet reveals a power of sympathy and imparts a sustaining courage to face the strain and battle of life. Her very existence is a revelation of faith and a tangible proof of an unseen world that gladdens the hearts and uplifts the courage of men.

¹ Cf. Capes, "St. Catherine de' Ricci," p. xliii. London, Burns and Oates.

CHAPTER XI

MISTRESS OF NOVICES

ON Christmas Eve, 1611, Mother de Chantal returned from Burgundy, and not long afterwards Sister Jeanne Charlotte was made Assistant to the Community and, at the suggestion of St. Francis, was appointed Mistress of Novices. She appears at this time to have made much progress in the way of perfection. Never, we are told, did she lose a thought upon her past or present efforts or achievements, but pressed onwards towards the work her hand still found to do. For she was now no longer in search of the right road to her destined goal, she had found it and was making her way to it under the fostering guidance of two great Saints, one of whom, St. Francis, likened her and her companions to the bee that passes from flower to flower, not casually, but of set purpose, not merely for the pleasure of regaling itself amid the verdant diapered meadows, but to gather honey. The which having gathered, it carries it to the hive and skilfully separating honey from wax forms the latter into comb wherein to store the honey for the ensuing winter. But we must give the Saint's whole beautiful simile: "So is it," he goes on to say, "with the devout soul. She passes in her meditation from mystery to mystery, not at random, but deliberately with intent to make skilful use of the thoughts she gathered therefrom, to find motives

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of love in them and to store them in her heart for the winter time [of desolation]." And again: "Like the heavenly spouse in the Canticle of Canticles, who, as this mystical bee, settles now upon the eyes, again upon the cheek, the hair, the lips of her Beloved, not only to satisfy by emotions of endless variety the passion of love within her, but to find therein new incentives to love, and having found them she stores in her heart those that she judges will best minister to her advancement. On fire with holy love she converses with her Beloved, questions Him, hearkens to His voice, sighs after Him, makes Him more her own with every breath she draws, looks upon Him with loving wonder. While He on His part fills her with delight, with inspiration, touching and opening her heart and pouring into it brightness, illumination, suavity without end. But all this takes place in so secret a manner that it might well be said of her holy converse with God what Scripture tells us of Moses: that being alone on the summit of the mountain he spoke to God and God answered him." (See Exod. xix, 19.)¹

As more and more Sister de Bréchart's spiritual capabilities were brought home to the holy Bishop he took a very special care to ground her in profound and perfect humility, that virtue so dear to his heart, and the practice of which he so particularly enjoined on his daughters.²

¹ "Œuvres," Tome IV; "Traité de l'Amour de Dieu," Vol. I, Livre VI, chap. 2.

² We read in the history of the Foundation of Lyons that St. Francis went one day all over the Monastery accompanied by the chaplain, the spiritual father, and all the Community. When he reached the novitiate Sister de Blonay, who was Mistress of Novices, asked him to write down

Mistress of Novices

It was probably with this end in view that he gave precedence in the Order to Mademoiselle Favre, although Mademoiselle de Brécard was its first member after Madame de Chantal. Yet he never concealed his opinion of her high intelligence and made free use of it when drawing up the Constitutions of the Order. Not only did he frequently consult her, but he followed her advice. He looked upon her as a soul that set aside every hindrance to the attainment of perfection and whose only occupation was God and His service. We are told too, in her life by Mother de Chaugy, that, although of such defective education, none could analyse a difficult passage in Holy Scripture or elsewhere better than Sister Jeanne Charlotte. It became quite a matter of course with the sisters to apply to her for elucidation when they came upon anything abstruse or obscure in their reading. If, as sometimes happened, they had an opportunity later of consulting some learned authority he invariably confirmed her interpretation and commended its lucidity.

It is, too, a remarkable fact that of the many cultivated women who joined the Order at that time none equalled her in the art of letter-writing both as to style and orthography. Yet these excellences were never tainted by vanity, and at no period of her life did she look upon herself as other than an unprofitable servant and a novice in virtue. During those early days composing and singing canticles at recreation became a common pastime, and Sister de Brécard was the Laureate of the Community. When Mother de Chantal had some thought or some

whatever he wished the novices should most practise. He sat down and wrote in the very centre of the paper she had left ready for him, the one word, *Humility*. This precious relic is still carefully preserved at Lyons

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event she wished to commemorate in verse it was to Jeanne Charlotte that she invariably had recourse. Indeed, in after years, when they were often far apart, the Saint in this still retained her services. The tradition is that she was no mean poetess, but, apparently, none of her verses have been preserved save one or two that are not distinguished for any literary merit.

Faithful to his office of surgeon to the community, St. Francis never spared his daughters, never flattered them, never shrank from the application of the knife. With an unfaltering and unerring accuracy he made the incision, and if any remnant of the evil remained it was not his fault. In the sacred challenge (*Cartel de défi*) which he gave his daughters for the new year of 1613, Sister de Bréchar d does not get off lightly. Each sister was given a suitable practice of virtue, and to her he gave :

“ Serious attention to ourselves and our charges ; no interfering with the charges of others, and no uncalled for criticisms of their actions : as a fine for each fault the *Salve Regina* for all Christian kings and princes. Patrons, St. Augustine and St. Catherine.”

In this way their Founder made public each one's weaknesses and imperfections, and encouraged that openness and simplicity which he wished to be the peculiar spirit of his Order.

There are but few details left us of Sister Jeanne Charlotte's daily life during the four and a half years she was Mistress of Novices and Assistant to the Community, but when we reflect that St. Francis in his Constitutions enjoins on all superiors to make the “ whole Community apply itself to the continual thought of the presence of

Mistress of Novices

God," we are not surprised to find little to relate of the faithful soul within the cloister, whose days succeed one another, each taken up with this holiest of occupations—an occupation which is brought within the reach of even the least spiritually gifted by these words of one of his most saintly daughters¹: "The presence of God does not consist, as is too commonly thought, in always speaking of Him, in listening unceasingly to His voice, in remaining before Him; but in doing His will rather than in ruminating over oneself and consciously yielding to self-occupation. This is the true practice of the presence of God."

When any special festival of the Church came round, not only upon the day itself but before and after, the sweetness of the mystery, joyful or sorrowful, that the Church was commemorating, took possession of her heart and her mind. She so partook of it that it excluded all thoughts foreign to it. For the time it was her life, she drank in all its wonderful significance, her nature assumed a perceptible tranquillity, and the festival was to her a living, breathing reality, not a mere commemoration of an event that once had taken place. Sometimes her fervour on these days so affected her health that the weakness of the body occasioned by this overflowing of the spirit laid her prostrate, and while under this spell of union with the Uncreated she could not utter one single word. One day at Mass, upon hearing the words which the Church chants in honour of a Martyr, "*Posuisti, in capite ejus coronam de lapide pretioso*,"² she felt an impetuous assault of divine love. God gave her a distinct sight and knowledge of the bliss of the

¹ Mother Marie de Sales Chappuis.

² Psalm xx. 4.

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martyr in whose honour the Mass was being celebrated, and her soul was caught in ecstasy, leaving her body motionless. Coming to herself at the end of Mass she tried to rise and leave the choir with the others, but was unable to stand. The sisters, thinking she had fainted, laid her on a bed, and were preparing some remedy, when Sister Péronne Marie de Châtel observed the wonderful sweetness of her countenance, and being herself accustomed to such favours said to the others, "This is a holy illness, take great care not to try to cure it. May it be incurable." Then leaving the cell she begged the sisters present also to come away, and Sister de Bréchar d was left for several hours in the enjoyment of her sweet rapture.

One sorrow beyond all others weighed upon the heart of Jeanne Charlotte at this time. Her father was getting old, he had spent his life in worldly pursuits, and in the company of heretics, and his daughter feared he had not even saving faith left. Her prayers for him were unceasing, and she begged of God to strike her freely in reparation for her father's wanderings from the narrow way if only He would grant him the grace of a penitent and happy death. This prayer was heard : in the spring of the year 1617 M. de Bréchar d died, happily reconciled to the Church. God had accepted her offering, and after her father's death Jeanne experienced terrible sufferings both of body and soul beyond, she tells us, her power to express. On hearing of her loss St. Francis wrote : "Yesterday our Mother showed me your letter with the news of the death of your father. Do not fear but that I will pray for him who was the father of my beloved daughter, for she is, I assure you, infinitely dear to me,

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and my heart affectionately shares all her joys and sorrows. But putting aside natural feeling you have in this death much occasion for holy consolation, for he attained a good old age, and, what is more important, died in religious dispositions." The Saint then tells her of his own sorrow in the death of his brother De Thorens,¹ "This poor boy," for whom he asks her prayers, and he says: "You can hardly believe how accomplished he was and how universally loved, and how he distinguished himself in the eyes of the Prince during the events of last year . . . but God is good and does all things in goodness. To Him be praise, honour, glory."²

At the beginning of the year 1615, Mother de Chantal was called to Lyons, where she made her first foundation. She remained there nine months, during which time the government of the house at home fell again on the shoulders of Sister de Bréchart. Many of St. Jane Frances's letters of this time have been preserved, and from them we learn the wonderful care she took in training her daughter in all the duties of a good Mother and Mistress.

Mademoiselle de Bréchart had made a general confession to a Capuchin Father in 1607, now we find her once more reviewing her whole life to St. Francis. Concerning this confession Mother de Chantal writes: "I shall be consoled when you have unburdened your heart by a general confession to this worthy Father. Do this with great courage, and I trust in the goodness of God that it will be very profitable to you. It is perhaps the best action that you have ever done in your life.

¹ The Baron de Thorens died May 23, 1617, in camp near Turin.

² "Œuvres," Tome XVIII; Lettres Vol. VIII, p. 14 sq.

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I will help you with my poor prayers, and I beg of you at that time pray much to our Lord for us, as I think He will grant you whatever you ask of Him.”¹ Then over and over again the good mother expresses her deep and tender affection for this daughter of hers, stopping short in one letter with these words: “but God has so fashioned you that if I say much more you will begin to weep.”² With that practical good sense for which she was so remarkable the Saint enters into many detailed instructions about the building, getting in provisions at the best seasons, the financial affairs of the house, and frequently sends charmingly affectionate messages to the workmen whom she never seems to forget. But beyond and above all, these letters teem with beautiful and solid instructions on the virtues of humility, prayer, obedience and mortification. Of these two latter virtues she says: “Prayer and mortification are the two principal exercises of religion. The one cannot go on well without the other. Mortification is the causeway which leads us to prayer, and whatever good inspirations we receive in prayer are the fruits of our mortification.”

Looking through the lives of Sister de Bréchart's contemporaries (to one of whom, Marie Françoise de Montmorin, we have devoted a short space in this volume), we glean light on her method of training those confided to her care. She fostered heroism amongst them at the expense of that coward that lurks somewhere within us all. They became humble, brave, self-sacrificing women. And, as she taught them to probe deeper into the heart of things, new interests of the spiritual signifi-

¹ “Vie et Œuvres,” Tome IV; Lettres Vol. I, p. 27.

² *Ibid.* p. 34.

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cance of the world, the cloister, and all within ; nay, too, all outside their reach, kept them in that humble attitude of mind so essential for the acquisition of attainable virtue and for the reverence and appreciation due to what is beyond our grasp. She helped them to liberate themselves from the subterfuges of self-love that render the soul so impervious to the light of truth. Hence we find in later years not only those within the convent, but likewise many seculars with whom she came in contact, leaning upon her as a very tower of strength.

CHAPTER XII

LYONS, THE FIRST FRENCH FOUNDATION

IN the summer of 1613 Madame de Gouffier, while still a member of the Order of the Paraclete, fell under the influence of St. Francis's "Introduction to a Devout Life," a little book which was already leading many souls nearer to God. The perusal of it created in her a great desire to become acquainted with the author. Elizabeth de Gouffier¹ was not happy in the Order to which she

¹ Elizabeth de Gouffier was daughter of François Arnault de Gouffier, head of a distinguished family of Saintonge (modern department, Lower Charente). Against her wishes and despite her remonstrances she was sent by her mother (*née* Gabrielle de Fedict) to the famous Abbey of the Paraclete, where in due time she was professed. This abbey, originally a simple oratory built by Abelard, in 1123, near Nogent-sur-Seine, had, as first abbess, in 1129, the celebrated Héloïse. It was named the Paraclete by its founder. In time it acquired great wealth, became head of an Order following the Rule of St. Benedict and had many illustrious abbesses. Marie de la Rochefoucault, who was abbess from 1593 to 1639, was daughter of Antoine de la Rochefoucault, Seigneur de Chaumont, Chamberlain to the King and Chevalier of his Order. Her family had a right to the abbatial dignity as a sort of fief and gave, from 1593 to 1727, five abbesses to the Paraclete. A sister of Marie Françoise de la Rochefoucault, Dame de Neuvy, became aunt to Hélène Arnault, Elizabeth's sister by her marriage with the Baron d'Anlezy, May 31, 1606 (see note on p. 44 of this volume).—(*Archives de M. le Comte de Damas d'Anlezy*.) The Abbess de la Rochefoucault held herself responsible solely to the Holy See and did not recognise the authority of the Bishop of Troyes (*Archives des Evêques et Reguliers, Troyes*). Certain houses were exempt from the jurisdiction of the Bishops and directly under the Holy See (Nolius). But in the case of the Paraclete the Abbess de la Rochefoucault acted from a self-conceived idea of independence.

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belonged, and upon hearing that St. Francis had founded a congregation of an ideal life of even higher perfection than that taught in his book, she determined to make a pilgrimage to Savoy. This she accomplished in company with three ladies who, chiefly at her instigation, proposed making a Foundation of the Visitation at Lyons. Soon after her arrival, by the advice of St. Francis and through his ministration, she applied to the Holy See for a dispensation from vows taken by her when at the Paraclete under the pressure of undue influence. Pending the Papal decision she resided at the Visitation of Annecy. St. Francis de Sales supported her application by a letter to the Roman authorities in which he described the ancient Abbey of the Paraclete as an institution wherein "the members all dwell in houses apart: the Lady Abbess likewise having her own house with a retinue of men and women, without rule, without enclosure, without method or discipline of any kind."¹

After a short stay at Annecy the three ladies who accompanied Madame de Gouffier returned to Lyons. These were Madame d'Auxerre (Marie Renée Trunel, left a widow at the age of twenty-two), Madame Isabelle Colin, also a widow, and Madame Chaudon, who, on account of the unhappiness of her married life, had been separated from her husband. This gentleman afterwards entered the novitiate of the Capuchins, but finding it too austere left, and upon leaving wished his wife to rejoin him, thus putting an end to her hopes of religious life. Madame d'Auxerre would have desired to enter the novitiate at Annecy, but the care of a young son made it impossible for her to live away from Lyons. Her

¹ "Œuvres," Tome XVI ; Lettres Vol. VI, p. 154.

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spiritual director, Père Grangier, S.J., a man of great wisdom and experience, had encouraged her visit to Annecy, and now further approved of her founding, with the sanction of St. Francis, a Convent of the Visitation at Lyons.

For this end a house was procured, the Archbishop¹ not only bestowing his blessing upon the undertaking, but giving a thousand crowns to facilitate the acquisition of necessary property. All appeared to be making satisfactory progress until a certain M. Lourdelot was appointed spiritual father to the new community. This priest, whose capacity was in no way commensurate with his zeal, conceived the idea of founding a new Order to emulate that of Annecy. For it he wrote a tentative rule, and won Mgr. de Marquemont's approval, under whose immediate jurisdiction it was to be placed.² He persuaded Mme. d'Auxerre, albeit against her better

¹ Mgr. de Marquemont, Archbishop of Lyons.

² The oppressive zeal of this good Archbishop makes it sometimes difficult to discern if he approved or disapproved of St. Francis's project. But thanks to his importunate questionings the ideal conceived by the Saint in founding his Order has been epitomised for us in the following question and reply : "What end have you in view in establishing a new Order of women when there are already so many ?" Mgr. de Marquemont one day asked the holy Bishop. The Saint answered : "To give God souls of prayer, whose inner life will make them worthy to serve and adore His Infinite Majesty in spirit and in truth. The great Orders already established in the Church give honour to Our Lord by their admirable exercises and brilliant virtues, so I wish the religious of mine to have no other aim nor ambition than to glorify God by their low estate. My desire is that this little Institute of the Visitation may be as a poor dovecot of innocent doves whose occupation it is to meditate devotedly on the law of God ; not to make themselves seen nor heard in the world ; to abide in the *Hole of the Rock, the Secret Place of the Wall*, and therein hidden, to give, by their lowly and humble plaint, never-ceasing, never-ending proof to their Beloved of the sorrow and love of their hearts."—("Œuvres de Ste. Chantal," Tome II, p. 186.)

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judgment, to consent to be the first Superior of the Congregation of the Presentation—the name given to the new Institute. The royal assent was applied for, and the installation took place under the auspices of the Archbishop, in the presence of a distinguished gathering. But it was soon painfully brought home to M. Lourdelot that “Unless the Lord build the house they labour in vain that build it.” Before six weeks had elapsed, the bickering, disorder, and confusion that reigned in the community, and the misunderstandings with the spiritual father were such that the foundresses, four in number, determined to dissolve partnership. At this juncture Madame de Gouffier, who, having received a dispensation from Rome, was on her way to be released from her vows at the Paraclete, arrived in Lyons, at the end of September 1614. This active-minded lady at once seized the situation, listened with the utmost commiseration to Madame d’Auxerre’s lamentable account of the new venture, called upon Père Grangier, who, it now transpired, had not been consulted as to the change of the Order, and repeated to him the whole sad tale. She then wrote to St. Francis, whom she besought to send some of his spiritual daughters to rectify matters. Père Grangier likewise wrote to the same effect. Meanwhile M. Lourdelot, with commendable humility, had been the first to announce to the holy Bishop the failure of his self-constituted Order. He was now thoroughly convinced of the wisdom of reverting to the original proposition. And the Archbishop himself asked St. Francis to allow Mother de Chantal and some of her sisters to come to Lyons. To this request St. Francis humbly replied that he esteemed it a great honour that Mgr.

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de Marquemont should make choice of his daughters for this work. Upon receiving the Saint's assent the good Archbishop sent his Vicar-General, M. Ménard, and M. Médico, the canon of Saint-Nizier, as his representatives to Annecy while, to give earnest of his gratitude, he volunteered to defray all the expenses of the journey of Mother de Chantal and her daughters to Lyons, sending his own coach to convey them. Thither Madame de Gouffier and Madame Colin also went, at his request, to accompany the sisters on their journey.

The holy Founders chose Sisters Favre, de Châtel, and de Blonay for the new Foundation, leaving Sister de Bréhard to govern at Annecy. On approaching the fair Provençal city St. Chantal tells us she felt that the good angels of France were welcoming her, as St. Francis had assured her they would. They arrived on February 1, 1615, and on the 2nd, the Feast of the Purification of Our Lady, the Archbishop presided with much ceremony at the installation of the Lyons Visitation, and M. Lourdelot preached on the occasion ;¹ the text of his sermon is not recorded.

Next day Madame d'Auxerre handed over the keys to Mother de Chantal and received the habit. The Saint remained nine months, and on her departure left Mother Favre to replace her as Superior. We must not omit to mention here that upon receiving the Royal Patent (it is dated September 1614), authorising the establishment of the Congregation of the Presentation, which licence apparently had not arrived at Lyons until after the installation of the said congregation, the Archbishop saw to his great surprise that wherever there was occasion

¹ "Œuvres," Tome XVI ; Lettres Vol. VI, Appendice, pp. 418 *sqq.*

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to mention the title of the new Institute the word *Visitation* was set down in clear characters instead of that of *Presentation*.¹ Marvelling at this strange phenomenon Mgr. de Marquemont carefully examined the word, but he could find no sign of erasure nor evidence of any tampering with the characters. There stood the words *Congregation of the Visitation* where *Congregation of the Presentation* ought to have been inscribed. The Archbishop, so to say, rubbed his eyes, but there was no getting away from the fact, and the only conclusion to be drawn was that God had guided the hand of the scrivener to write what in His eternal counsel He had decreed—

“In vain our labours are, whate’er they be,
Unless God gives the Benedicite.”²

The idea of reverting to the original intention of founding a house of the Visitation had become known in the city and created some opposition ; but upon hearing of the wonderful document those who were antagonistic no longer offered resistance, and were heard to say : “The hand of the Lord is with the Religious of the Visitation.”

It is of interest to note how the holy Bishop of Geneva viewed the royal assent thus so unaccountably given to the introduction of his Order into France. He writes : “This trait of Divine Providence has given me great pleasure. It is as if Our Lord wished to make use of a royal voice to proclaim His wishes.”³ And in the

¹ The original document is still in the Archives of the first monastery of Lyons, transferred to Venice.

² Robert Herrick.

³ “Œuvres de St. François de Sales,” Lettre MVII, Vol. XVI. Edition complète. Lyon, Paris : Emmanuel Vitte MCMX.

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same letter, speaking of M. Lourdelot (he who had caused all the mischief and upset all the Founders' arrangements for their first Foundation), the Saint merely says, "M. Loudelot, who caused the deflection, will now bring back his company to their original design." St. Francis was not the one to touch a wound without necessity.

CHAPTER XIII

FOUNDATION OF MOULINS

As soon as Madame de Gouffier was released from her vows she wished to re-engage herself and enter the Visitation. But although both the holy Founders had unquestionably a sincere regard for her and were not at first averse to her joining the Visitation, upon more intimate acquaintance with her character they discovered what St. Chantal calls her "terrible spirit," and gave her no further encouragement.

In order to facilitate the accomplishment of this wish, in January, 1616, Elizabeth de Gouffier made up her mind to go to Paris. On her way she stopped at Moulins, where the severity of the winter detained her for several months. She had now, to quote the annals, "no heart for anything except our Blessed Father and his dear little humble Visitation." And she made use of her enforced sojourn in this town to inoculate her hostess, Madame de Verne, widow of the late Treasurer of France, with her desire to found at Moulins a house of this Order such as she had already helped to establish at Lyons. By degrees Madame de Gouffier gathered round her in this lady's house a number of gentlewomen who assembled there at her request, and by her powers of persuasion she gained them to her cause and triumphed over all irresolution on their parts. In the month of

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March she made bold to announce her project to Annecy, where it met with a very half-hearted reception. The recollections of Lyons were not encouraging, and on April 3 Mother de Chantal wrote that she could not give any sisters to make foundations. However, on the 14th she confided to Mother Favre that her refusal was not final, and unfortunately she allowed a copy of the Rules to be sent to Madame de Gouffier.¹ This act, as might be expected from a woman of her type, Madame de Gouffier at once regarded as an official recognition of her Foundation and no longer troubled to keep herself in communication with Annecy. For three or four months she observed complete silence, with the result that Mother de Chantal concluded that this troublesome lady had given up the idea and had gone to Paris to see after her own affairs. But soon, to her dismay, she indirectly learnt that the project was by no means given up. The Saint was greatly displeased, and writing at this time to Mother Favre she says : "I am surprised at my Sister Gouffier, she is losing her time, yes, losing her time !" But far from losing her time, in a month from that date she had accomplished what she was aiming at. Her brother-in-law the Baron d'Anlezy,² the Archbishop, the Governor of the Province, the Capuchin and Jesuit Fathers and the chief authorities of the town, all had been gained over. A house was purchased by her, in which a little chapel was beautifully decorated under her supervision, and on Saturday, June 25, 1616, by permission of the Archbishop, an imposing opening ceremony took place. The Cathedral Chapter and all

¹ "Vie et Œuvres," Tome IV ; Lettres Vol. I, p. 98 sq.

² See chap. vi, p. 44, note.

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the Religious Orders came in Procession : the Governor and his family, the Mayor and Corporation, and a numerous assembly of the nobility of Bourbonnais were present. The function concluded with a *Te Deum* and Episcopal Benediction.

The Visitation was founded, but without Visitation Nuns. The arch was erected, but without the keystone. On July 4 Mgr. de Marquemont passed through Moulins, and seeing the state of affairs he, the Governor, and the Mayor of Moulins, all three appealed on the subject to St. Francis.

The Archbishop wrote as follows :

“ MY LORD,

“ On passing through this town of Moulins on my way to Paris, I have seen the beginnings of a house of the Visitation which has just been set on foot by Madame de Gouffier. It is most necessary to send Madame de Chantal here at once, or if her health does not permit of this, some other lady who can give the spirit and the habit to the young girls and widows who wish to serve Our Lord in this holy Institute. So far things promise well, but I must tell you, my Lord, what a good doctor once said to me, that even if one may propose to give afterwards other milk than that of its mother to a child, the first milk must be from the mother, if one wants to do what is most beneficial for the child, for by a secret of Nature the author of the child's being is provided with what is best for the child. Now you understand me. If Madame de Chantal, the true mother of your congregation, could come here to give the first milk to your daughters, I foresee as much

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happiness for this foundation as for that of Lyons, which continues to give increasing satisfaction, and increasing hopes that God will be glorified thereby. And it is to His glory we aspire. There are some difficulties here, as I expected, but as soon as the religious come and the recitation of the Office is begun, they will disappear. Send them, then, I beseech you, as quickly as possible. Begging the blessing of your holy prayers,

“Your very humble and affectionate brother,

“DENIS, ARCHBISHOP OF LYONS.

“MOULINS : *July 6, 1616.*”

The Marshal de Saint-Géran, Governor of the Bourbonnais, writes :

“MY LORD,

“I have been informed that your permission is necessary in order that ladies should come here to perfect the good work (a house of Holy Mary) that has been begun in this town, the chief city of my Government, and I feel sure you will grant this my humble request. We already have a suitable house and a very beautiful Oratory, where the Pontifical Blessing has been given, expressly procured by the Archbishop of Lyons, who at my request had promised to erect the cross, but was prevented by urgent business. Your permission, then, for these ladies to come is all that we now need. That the Bourbonnais should be the first province to receive the Religious of your Order I look upon as a glory of my period of Government. I am not ignorant of your reputation for holiness of life and merits throughout France. For this reason I wish when your religious

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come here to give them one of my daughters. Besides the assurance of the sisters being well looked after here, which Madame de Gouffier will be able to give you, I solemnly assure you that I have no other wish than to employ in their service all the authority with which I am vested in this province. Believe me, Monseigneur,

“Your very humble and most devoted servant,

“DE SAINT-GÉLAN.

“AU CHÂTEAU DE MOULINS : *July 3, 1616.*”

The third letter, from the Mayor and Sheriffs of Moulins, was to the same effect. The holy Bishop at once saw the matter had gone so far that it would not be wise now to discourage it, therefore, as it was expedient to act without delay, and as Mother de Chantal was ill, Sister de Bréhard was chosen as the first Mother of the new foundation. Writing to Madame de Gouffier at this time, Mother de Chantal says : “Assuredly if the glory of God and your reputation were not so much involved in this transaction we should never risk sending our sisters. Our reasons would be unanswerable in regard to anyone save you yourself. Sister Jeanne Charlotte will tell you what they are. Our experience at Lyons has taught us to walk circumspectly. But we have not the heart to disappoint you, my daughter, who are so much one of ourselves. May God be your portion and ours for all eternity. Adieu, my daughter, I embrace you with all my heart. But let us not engage in any more combats until we are fully armed ! I prefer to have few monasteries and those well established rather than many badly provided for.”¹

¹ “*Vie et Œuvres,*” Tome IV ; *Lettres* Vol. I, p. 134. See also “*Selected Letters,*” p. 40.

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Three sisters were chosen to accompany Mother de Bréchart, the youngest of whom, Sister Jeanne Marie de la Croix de Fesigny, aged sixteen, made her profession upon the morning of July 22, the day the sisters left for Moulins. Before starting they received the Bishop's blessing, and to each sister he handed a letter which he had written to help her in her own peculiar needs. That to Mother de Bréchart was as follows :

“ANNECY, *July 22, 1616.*

“The Congregation you are about to form is for the glory of God, therefore you are rendering an apostolic service to Our Lord and His glorious Mother. My very dear daughter, you will guide this new company in its spiritual warfare against the world, the devil, and the flesh ; or should I not rather call you bees swarming in a new hive, wherein you will all work together in that divine love which is more delicious than honey ? Take up then this holy undertaking with great courage and entire confidence in the goodness of Him who has called you to it, for when did any one ever hope in God and was confounded ? Distrust of self is good so long as it serves as a basis for trust in God, but if ever it leads you to discouragement, uneasiness, sadness, or melancholy, reject it, I beseech of you as the temptation of temptations, and never reason with such feelings, for it is a truth beyond question that God permits many difficulties to arise in the way of those who undertake to serve Him, but still, so long as they trust in Him never does He allow them to sink under the burden. Believe me it is essential for you never to argue with yourself in favour of the temptation to discouragement under any possible

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pretext, not even that plausible one of humility. My dearest daughter, humility refuses offices, but it is not obstinate in its refusal, and the humble soul, when employed by those in authority, no longer makes reflections upon its unworthiness, but with charity believes all things, hopes all things, bears all things. Holy humility is always simple, and is a great upholder of obedience. As it never dares to think that of itself it can do anything, so does it believe that with obedience it can do all things : and as true simplicity humbly refuses charges, true humility undertakes them with simplicity. Your body is feebleness itself, but the nuptial robe of charity will cover all that. A person of frail health excites in others a godly consideration for her, nay even a feeling of unusual tenderness towards her if she be seen to bear her cross sweetly and gently. We should be just as simple in asking and accepting remedies for our sufferings as in bearing them with courage and meekness. He who maintains a sweet serenity amid pains and weariness, in whom peace reigns amid the worry and embarrassment of affairs, is almost perfect.

“Few, indeed, even among religious, have attained to this degree of blessedness. Yet there are and have at all times been some, and to their perfection we must aspire. Almost everyone finds certain virtues easy, and others difficult to practise, and each one argues in favour of the virtue which he finds easy, and exaggerates the difficulties of those that are hard to him to attain. There were ten virgins and only five of them had the oil of sweetness, mercy, and gentleness. This equableness of humour, this meekness and suavity of heart, is rarer than perfect chastity, but is all the more desirable. On that account I

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recommend it to you, my dearest daughter, because to it, as to the oil of the lamp, is attached the flame of good example ; for there is nothing that gives so much edification as the kindness of charity.

“ Hold the balance equally between your daughters, so that natural gifts may not influence you, and make unequal the distribution of your good offices and your affection towards them. How many persons exteriorly repelling are to God’s eyes very pleasing. To those who live according to their natural inclinations, beauty, gracefulness, the gift of speaking well, are oftentimes very attractive ; but charity, looking only for beauty of the heart and true virtue, treats all equally. Go then, my daughter, to the work for which God has raised you up. He will be at your right hand that no difficulties may affright you. He will hold you by the hand so that you may walk in His ways. Be of great courage, and let that courage be not only great, but long-suffering, and enduring. To possess it you must ask it often of Him who alone can give it to you, and if in simplicity of heart you respond to His grace He will not refuse it. May the love and the peace and the consolation of the Holy Spirit be for ever in your heart.

“ You are my daughter, and with the affection of a Father I bless you. May God bless you in going, in staying, in serving Him, in serving your neighbour, in humbling yourself within your own nothingness, and in raising you out of yourself to rest in Him who is your chief delight. May God alone be all in all to you, my very dear daughter.—Amen.

“✠ FRANCIS, BISHOP OF GENEVA.”

† “Œuvres,” Tome XVII ; Lettres Vol. VII, pp. 258 *sqq.*

CHAPTER XIV

UNEXPECTED TROUBLES

MADAME DE GOUFFIER accompanied the Sisters Foundresses on their journey to Moulins, if not the entire way, at least the greater part of it. Having assured them that she had made provision for all their wants on the road, they took her at her word and themselves made none. The results were disastrous. Mother de Bréhard soon fell dangerously ill. Madame de Gouffier, the self-constituted Superior of the party, making light of this illness, refused to procure her even the most necessary alleviations. Fortunately, however, Mother Favre had given the sisters a pistole when passing through Lyons, and with this they secretly purchased a few little comforts for the invalid. From Roanne to Dijon they went by water.¹ As Mother de Bréhard lay on deck the hot August sun beat down on her aching head, and their so-called benefactress would allow of no awning nor any protection whatsoever from its burning rays lest, perchance, it might impede her own enjoyment of the view.

From Dijon the travellers took coach to Moulins, where they arrived on the evening of August 21, 1616. The representatives of the Archbishop that same evening came to welcome them. Next day the various authorities of the town, ecclesiastical and lay, called to offer their

¹ Why they made this circuitous route we are not told.

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services and their protection. Madame de Gouffier, posing as Superior, received these tokens of respect and devotion with becoming grace. All the town folk, too, were demonstrative in their delight and satisfaction at having amongst them the Daughters of Holy Mary. Meanwhile the sisters who accompanied Mother de Bréchart were chafing under the indignities and slights to which she was subjected; yet they could not have failed to see God's hand in permitting this painful treatment of their Mother to bring into relief her virtues. To judge by her charm of manner and gentleness with this froward lady one might have thought that she was under the greatest obligations to her and, saint-like, she no doubt herself thought so. In the midst of her sufferings her chief anxiety appears to have been that her sisters and she should not fail, truly and humbly, to accept this touchstone, this test of the genuineness of their claim to belong to God alone and to drink of His Chalice, so with inimitable tact Jeanne Charlotte ceded her position and her rights. "For," as she said, "in no way must we cause disedification to our neighbour nor allow our own peace to be disconcerted."¹

But the injurious effects of the unprovided journey, its hardships, and those of the first days of Moulins were beyond her physical strength. Before one week she fell so seriously ill that for two long months she was confined to her bed. During this time she began to face new and unexpected troubles brought about by the reckless be-

¹ See "Vie des Premières Mères de l'Ordre de la Visitation," par Révérende Mère Françoise Madeleine de Chaugy. Nouvelle édition. Paris. Ch. Poussielgue, rue Cassette 15. 1892. Vol. I, p. 187, note *b*.

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haviour of Madame de Gouffier. Debts contracted by her on behalf of the sisters for things which up to this time she allowed them to consider as gifts, they were now called upon to pay. The house, which was utterly out of repair, had indeed been purchased by her, but the owner now applied to Mother de Bréhard for payment. Such was the first fulfilment of her fair promises. No lay sister had as yet been received into the Visitation and all the fatiguing labour of the house and garden fell upon the choir sisters, who had likewise to chant the Holy Office, while never failing to keep up an exact observance of the Rule. They scrubbed, and swept, and polished the house, washed the linen, and cooked such poor food as they could command, for meat was seldom seen in the refectory, vegetables of their own planting being their chief sustenance. All this was done not only cheerfully but merrily, with a mirth that could only have sprung from hearts brimming over with the spirit of holy joy : “ When weary not tired, when straitened not constrained.” They ended their day by sleeping in a garret, the roof of which afforded so little protection from the inclemency of the weather that often in the morning the beds on which they had passed the night were soaked with rain, or, later in the season, covered with snow. But had not Mother de Chantal told them many a time at Annecy what was meant by perfection in the virtue of poverty ? There was no perfection, she would say, in the mere privation of even necessary things ; but the bearing such privations without murmur, the acceptance of the sufferings they entailed without a shadow of complaint, that was the perfection of the practice of poverty. And she adds : “ I beseech

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you let few people know of your difficulties, and none that cannot remedy them, and let there be no exaggeration, for our Blessed Father says : 'Souls dedicated to God should have no other to-morrow than divine providence.' " But this wise and prudent woman continues : "Poverty is holy and lovable, yet when it is extreme it is to be feared that the spirit of poverty may perish."

Well may it have cheered the heart of Mother de Bréhard to see how literally her daughters were putting in force the perfection of the practice of poverty. Bravely they worked until God sent them help and relieved them of their troublesome benefactress. That Madame de Gouffier was ignorant of her limitations, and believed herself endowed with talents of which she was destitute, is the chief excuse for many of her actions. Her energy outbalanced her power of directing it, her restless spirit created around her an atmosphere of unrest, and her activities frequently begot turmoil. Although the consideration of the uncertainty of results too often takes the vitality out of our work and incapacitates us from giving of our best, in her case any such beneficent hesitation would have been a God-send, for she ventured upon undertakings without any kind of adequate calculation. Her good deeds were the outcome of an ambition that itches perpetually to live in evidence, and she sought to be looked upon as My Lady Bountiful while holding back the gifts which should have entitled her to the appellation. And yet with all this St. Jane Frances tells us she had a good heart, but that evidence of it was frequently lacking cannot be denied by the most charitably minded.

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Mother de Bréhard was a contrast to her in many ways, and that she was so, not so much by nature as by grace, makes her virtue all the more imitable. She was a very complex character, enthusiastic, and impulsive, yet silent and reflective ; where Madame de Gouffier would have been persuasive and plausible Mother de Bréhard, had she let herself go, would have been caustic. The former acted from impulse, the latter had trained herself to act from reason and reflection. Both possessed great tenacity of purpose, but the one pushed blindly through difficulties regardless of consequences, while the other, Mother Jeanne Charlotte, looked them full in the face and overcame them. If her plans were frustrated she may indeed have shed a tear, but it was soon replaced by a smile, for she had achieved that emancipation from self that comes of hard resolve, and she never took the line of least resistance. At no time was the expansion of her spirit more lovable than during epochs of special suffering such as she had at this time to endure. Sister Jeanne Marie de la Croix de Fesigny tells us that amid a thousand privations, and although the good Mother dare not open her lips except to agree with Madame de Gouffier's arrangements—and she meddled in everything—they were all perfectly happy.

This valiant woman had the power of imbuing those around her with her own faith and philosophy. Her personality breathed vigour into the house. Her sisters were joyful, because the very essence of true joy is to feel that it is not transient, that it is independent of material conditions, that while earthly joy is vitiated, circumscribed as soon as possessed by the consciousness of its limits, its uncertainty, its ephemeral conditions,

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spiritual joy, be it as a lightning flash, leaves an echo in the heart, for the heart knows that one day it will come to stay.

The bright example of their Mother so worked on the heart of Sister Jeanne Marie that she began to feel unhappy lest she loved her Superior too much. Confiding her scruple to a holy priest he advised her no longer to permit herself any demonstration of affection, however innocent, towards the Mother, and to let God alone be the confidant of her sacrifice. She did so, and truly God alone knew what it cost her devoted young heart. In this struggle Mother de Bréchart was all unconsciously a powerful help to her child, for she transmitted to her daughters the instructions she had herself received. She taught them that their vocation was a distinct apostolic mission, that they were no more at liberty to wash their hands of it than was any Christian soul of the task Providence had allotted her. Mary was to be their model. They were her daughters by the voice of the people, and Mary had accomplished perfectly her mission upon earth. Her outward life was passed in the fulfilment of the commonplace duties of a woman of the people, her inner life the holiest, the highest, the most intense, with the exception of that of her divine Son, that had ever been lived upon earth. She was poor, hidden, unregarded by the world, yet co-redemptress of it. Even so, in their small measure, these Visitandines of Moulins learnt that in the fulfilment of their vocation they took upon themselves an intercessory responsibility for the souls of others, and should be continually defeating, by sacrifice of one form or another, the work of the evil one. Any deliberate failure to take advantage of

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such opportunities of sacrifice—any slackness of inward effort—they were to look upon as, so to say, washing their hands of their allotted task. Such in brief was the trend of the instructions St. Francis gave his daughters as he sat familiarly with them in the orchard of La Galerie, the very slowness and hesitancy of his delivery adding weight to his utterances. The sisters hung upon his words, for they knew that he was a man of God, and that through him came to them the message of the Holy Spirit. He encouraged whatever tended to foster humility, and told them that “in everything they did or aimed at their first care and intention must be to lower and humble themselves.”¹ He would have them jealous of those household occupations that the world looked upon as abject, the very lowliness of which furnished constant opportunities of virtue. And after all what were they but stokers of the good God for the furnace of His good ship *the Church*, to speed her across the tumultuous waves of this life safely into port? As each sister strove in her own life to exemplify this doctrine of their Founder a thought expressed in recent verse recurs to the memory as not inapplicable to them :

“For she hath built for the eternal years,
Secret, unseen, like mite in tropic sea,
That rears a wondrous isle from out its bone
And in the work absorbed yet perseveres.”²

¹ “Answers of St. Chantal on the Rules, Constitutions and Custom Book of the Institute of the Visitation.” Translated from the French edition printed at Annecy in 1849. Clifton Austin and Son, 1882, p. 174.

² Should these lines meet the Author’s eye we hope to be pardoned for having substituted the third for the first person in the first line.

CHAPTER XV

OUTPOURINGS TO A FRIEND

WHILE Mother de Bréhard was thus by example as well as by precept educating her daughters, little did they know of her inner life. Being one of God's elect, as after her death it pleased Him to make manifest, she had through life to bear His supreme gift of sorrow, and that in its bitterest form, Depression. To be cheerful under other forms of suffering is admirable, but to be cheerful when hope seems dying within and a secret sense of failure in the work God has committed to us is gnawing at our hearts—when, to use her own words, she was unhelped by the sympathy of a single human being and credence was given to false accusations against her—to be cheerful in such circumstances is heroism, the heroism of the saints. And this mark of holiness shone forth in Mother de Bréhard in proportion, it would seem, to the weight of the burden she was called upon to bear. What courage is there comparable to that of the weary fainting heart held up by an heroic will? The following letters to her friend and former companion at Annecy, Mother Péronne Marie de Châtel reveal virtue of this order. She writes :

“ . . . Your pill is gilt and sugared so that you can hardly taste it. You are beloved, petted and charitably helped in every necessity that arises. Alas ! my dear

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Sister, such is not our good fortune here. You cannot imagine how poor, sad, and desolate we have been. Just one lady gave us assistance, and now she has been persuaded to have nothing more to do with us. Up to the present we have received five subjects, thank God. One of them who does the house-work is so closely united to God and so wrapped up in Him that it is difficult for her to withdraw herself from contemplation. This does not, however, interfere with the faithful discharge of her manual work. Most wonderful things are happening in the spiritual life of Sister Françoise Gabrielle Bally ; she always has been a holy soul. Sister Jeanne Marie de la Croix is developing very much both in mind and body, and is universally loved. We are expecting four or five postulants who, if I mistake not, have true vocations. Alas ! my dearest Sister, there is no way out of our trouble. However, we are beginning to breathe a little more freely, and always trust in our good God as we have done in the past and always will do with His grace. Such is the state of the house. Now to speak a little of myself. I am as miserable as I can be, and sometimes I cannot help letting it be seen how weary I am of this cross of Superiorship. Now as I write to you I feel weighed down with an extreme disgust for it. Ask God either to take the burden from me or to fit me for it ; for the more I go on the more I see how unsuited I am, and were it not that one must shut one's eyes on all that our superiors do I should say that I do not know what they could have been thinking about in putting this load upon my shoulders. I know that Our Lord would help me to bear it if I were faithful to Him, but this is my crowning sorrow, that I am not faithful—

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not in any respect. It seems to me that I have the desire to be so. Yet my general conduct proves to me that my good will is a mere velleity, one of those desires, languid, weak, paralysed, which fill hell with sinners. As I tell you all this I cannot keep the tears back, but it relieves me somewhat to unburden myself in confidence to your Charity. For I know you will have compassion on me and help me with your prayers."

Again a little later Mother de Bréchar d writes to Mother Péronne Marie :

"My pen is powerless to tell you my thoughts, my beloved and dearest Sister. I should like to speak heart to heart in answer to your dear affectionate letter ; however, the mortification of being deprived of this consolation comes so often that I have become quite accustomed to it. I have great compassion for you, as I am told that you feel the burden of your charge and that your aversion from it continues to such an extent as almost to make you lose all courage. Oh, dear friend, bear with me when I say this is not right : you should conform to necessity. I have passed through the same trouble and I have found that the more I yielded to the weariness and disrelish of it all the heavier it seemed to make my burden. Had we the combined courage, cheerfulness, and serenity of a dozen stronger souls than our own we should need it all to fulfil the many duties of our charge. How, then, shall we hold up if we deprive ourselves of the little strength we have by giving way to anxiety and discouragement ? And my experience is, dearest Sister, that the courage and contentment of the daughters depend on the mother's—they look to her. Let us then sacrifice

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ourselves for love of Him who for love of us has sacrificed Himself.

“In our case resignation is not enough, for we are the daughters of the great master of holy indifference, which he so accurately defines, and which she [our Mother] so perfectly practises. I know no better remedy to cure us of losing our time in self-pity and ruminating over the difficulties of our charge than to reflect on our Lord’s goodness in condescending to employ us in so noble a service as that of helping Him to save souls. Can you through pusillanimity and faint-heartedness consent to aim at a poorer crown than that offered to you by His Divine Majesty? Did St. Peter decline the honour when the Lord God of Hosts appointed him His Vicar-General? Did he decline to accept the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven when with them the salvation of the whole world was confided to him? Yet humanly speaking he was undoubtedly ill-fitted for such high office—he who was but a poor fisherman and a sinner. But power is made perfect in infirmity.

“Our imagination oftentimes deceives us, dearest Sister, and makes us fancy that it would be more advantageous for our own souls if we had less to do with those of others. But anyone can see through this fallacy. In carrying out such charges as ours we have far more opportunities of humbling, mortifying, and denying ourselves and of trusting wholly to God than when we are free of responsibility. The labour may indeed be more, but if we are to *reap in joy* we must *sow in tears*.

“Let us, then, forget self and think only of our Master and of doing His will in all that He has committed to us. Let us give up our self-seeking and desire no other

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consolation than that of accomplishing in joy and serenity His divine will. Is it not a very real and solid happiness to feel that with the grace of God we employ the talents given to us by the great Householder according to His liking and that souls confided to us are making progress in His holy love? If the rank of Superior is distasteful to your humility remember that it is but a vain and empty title like to those of the great ships which his Lordship tells us of in his *Treatise on the Love of God*. 'One,' he says, 'bears the name of *Victory* and it has never gained a trophy; another is called the *Sun* and it has no splendour nor glory about it.' So are we called Superiors and yet we are the subjects of as many minds as we govern. We live in greater fear of neglecting them than they of displeasing us. Like servants we are worried and bustled about in a thousand ways whilst those under us repose like mistresses, pray as much as they please, and enjoy the fruit of our labours. People make acts of submission to us and you call that being Superior, but this submission and reverence paid to us is really offered to God, whom they see in us, and not to ourselves, just as we genuflect before the tabernacle only because the Blessed Sacrament is enshrined within it. My poor dear Sister, let us have but one thought—to carry our cross valiantly to the end. Just like you, I too made complaints formerly, but now my aim is to have no wishes and to reserve all my strength for whatever obedience shall command and to perform it to the very best of my ability. And if I fail my failure manifests to me my own incapacity and weaknesses and gives me the grace to bear with myself and return (as it were) to the novitiate. We have a very good God to deal with, who

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knows all our miseries, for He has formed us with His own divine hand, and though we are deformed by sin yet He wills by His grace to reform us. He looks upon us sinners as we are, not with indignation, but with tender compassion. Laden with all our miseries let us throw ourselves into His arms, relying on His providence, which so lovingly governs those who trust. The way, dear Sister, to secure the special guidance and protection of His sovereign and lovable goodness is neither to expect nor desire any other help than His. Amid the overwhelming trials and afflictions that I have met with here, I have found the necessity of this. For fourteen or fifteen months I have had to bear them unhelped by the sympathy of a single human being, for God permitted that the very persons to whom I most looked for help failed me and added to my bitterness. They gave credence to false accusations against me; and God permitted, for my good, that in many ways which my pen cannot describe they should annoy me.

“And now I am in a way inured to suffering and am no longer so sensitive. When creatures fail us God is by our side, happily for us. The less we have from them the more we have from Him. He is very near us at such times. Our good sisters here have no other aspiration than to be generous and brave. We are twenty, counting the postulants, and several capable subjects are asking admission. May the sweet will of our good Jesus dispose of all things according to His good pleasure.

“You are much more venturesome than we since you already speak of building. We poor things cannot so far even dream of such a thing, for we have been let in

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for a sum of seven or eight thousand francs by the person you know,¹ and have not a sou to meet it. Little by little we are trying to free ourselves.

“Pray God, my dearest Sister, that we may progress in all things spiritual ; as for the temporal I do not worry about them. Let us do cheerfully our little duties, supporting each other in the presence of our dear Saviour and rejoicing in Him amidst our puny labours through the merits of His holy Passion, the remembrance of which we are now about to celebrate. Adieu, dearest and best of Sisters.

“Ever your very affectionate and unworthy sister,
“JEANNE CHARLOTTE DE BRÉCHARD.”²

¹ Madame de Gouffier.

² Chaugy, “Vie des Premières Mères de la Visitation Sainte Marie.” *Librairie Ch. Poussielgue, rue Cassette 15.* 1892. Tome I, pp. 192 *sqq.* See also “Péronne Marie,” Burns and Oates, 1912, chap. xxiii.

CHAPTER XVI

A MOTHER'S SYMPATHY

THE preceding letters bear their own testimony. They make clear to us how God hedged round Mother Jeanne Charlotte's path with sufferings and kept far from her all self-satisfaction, training her the while to seek His face through the darkness. For never, the holy Bishop told her, was she to look too long upon herself without looking unto God.

Such a life of daily self-conquest could not fail to create a very high order of perfection in the Community she governed. Indeed, the fervour of the lives of its members and the odour of their virtue created an atmosphere of tranquillity and supernatural peace felt by all who came in contact with them. Far and near the reputation of these Daughters of Holy Mary spread abroad and began to draw new subjects to the monastery. Some were women of distinction, and some brought the material help so much needed. Amongst them was Madame de Verne, known in the Order under her maiden name as Sister Jeanne Marie Cadier. Many a time, in later years, as she drew spiritual strength from the pervading influence of holiness in which she lived, must this fervent religious have blessed the day when the troublesome Madame de Gouffier crossed her path and let her have no peace till she co-operated with her in founding

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the Convent of which she was now so edifying a member. She suffered much opposition in her vocation from her friends, for they only saw in it a great loss to the little world of Moulins in which her works of charity and her beautiful example of holiness were doing so much good. But she saw how "a cloistered life may cover the whole world with its activity if it be a life of worship."¹ And so she shut herself up in the cloister and learnt from Mother de Bréhard how to lead such a life, impetrating grace on countless souls distant and unknown: graces that like beams from the far-off sun should give warmth to the heart and light to the intelligence of those who lived in darkness and in error, till they too led lives of worship and gave glory to God.

Secular friends now also came forward with financial help. Madame la Maréchale de Saint-Géran became a generous benefactress. But pre-eminent among the good friends of the Convent was M. de Palierne, Treasurer-General to the King, who lived at Moulins. He took upon himself the entire charge of the business affairs of the nuns, dubbing himself with the title of *Temporal Father of the Community*. So zealous and indefatigable was he in the discharge of his new self-constituted office that both the holy Founders put complete trust in him. And when at last the erection of a monastery had to be undertaken, not only did he look after the workmen and superintend the plans, but this wonderful clerk of the works freely opened his purse. And this was not all—with a rare magnanimity he went security to a large extent for the nuns in circumstances that made the repayment of his loan very hazardous.

¹ Faber, "Bethlehem," p. 74.

A Mother's Sympathy

No less did God care for the Community in things spiritual. The sons of St. Ignatius, whom St. Francis would have his daughters consult in their difficulties, showed as much care and forethought for the needs of their souls as M. de Palierne did for their material well-being. Appreciating to the full the great qualities of Mother de Bréchar, the Father Rector used to say that she knew how to suffer in the true Gospel spirit and how to swallow pills ungilt. A few extracts from Mother de Chantal's letters during these days of tribulation will show how this kind Mother made the trials of her daughter her own. In February 1617 we find her writing : " Our Lord wills His glory and our good to come out of it all. But we must be very humble and charitable in bearing with the defects and the troublesome ways of that neighbour of ours.¹ We shall be too exacting if we do not love her for the good that is in her, and what is more, dearest Sister, we should accept the inconvenience caused by the want of not only useful but necessary things, as coming from the Providence of God and not from the hands that present them to us, or procure them for us. By this means, believe me, they will come to you with a sense of sweetness rather than of repugnance. You understand me ; I mean to say, if Our Lord does not approve of her actions that will not prevent Him from taking great pleasure in seeing you bear with these actions as tribulations, and trials which are sent to you by His divine goodness should be borne, for they are sent in order to make you advance in the perfection of divine love. Look over these letters I am writing to our sisters and if you

¹ Madame de Gouffier.

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approve of them give them to them ; if not, tear them up. Take all possible care, my darling, to keep your daughters united to you.”¹

On October 26 of the same year St. Chantal again writes : “ We have received your letter of the 15th and also the preceding ones, together with those of Madame de Gouffier, who promised to set out for Paris the next day. She is, believe me, a burden upon our shoulders and there is no need for you, nor indeed for anyone, to take the trouble of making her moods known to us, or of pointing out the necessity of her leaving you. We know it all too well. Nothing remains now but to find a means of inducing her to go, and God will provide that. She ought to see very clearly by our letters that we no longer desire her to remain with you. Both his lordship and I wish to write quite fully to her. If she has not already left, for God’s sake get her away as quietly as you can. Once she is outside it will be a God-send to you, and as soon as she is I will write you whatever God tells me to say. But take care not to upset her nor provoke her to excitement. In a word, my poor dearest daughter, Our Lord never abandons us if we have holy humility and patience. Believe, hope, and have compassion for this poor soul, for it is all nothing but temptation, and we know that at the bottom she is good. Besides, God has made use of her exertions for our little Society, so she ought always to be treated with respect and gratitude ”²

And once more, on January 30, 1618, St. Chantal writes :

¹ “ Vie et Œuvres,” Tome IV ; Lettres Vol. I, p. 171.

² *Ibid.* pp. 226-7.

A Mother's Sympathy

"Now the answer to all your long letters is to send you back to our dear Rules which ought to be your safest guide. Reflect on every word, on every syllable of them, and you will find in them more than ever I could say to you. In a word, most holy humility, gentleness and reserve ought always to accompany our speech, our actions and even our thoughts."¹

Nor did St. Francis fail to help Mother Jeanne Charlotte with his sympathy, and the remembrance of his own sufferings in the Chablais² would have given that living touch of comradeship without which no sympathy is complete; while advice coming from one who has gained knowledge from similar experience has a practical value, it energises the will in times of depression. Such must this afflicted daughter have found in the perusal of the following letter :

"December, 1618.

"I beg of you always to love well this old Father who cherishes you with all his heart and to whom you are most assuredly becoming every day more dear. It delights him to hear that, thanks to God, this house of yours advances in humility, gentleness, peace, and divine love; for this, may His goodness be eternally blessed. . . .

¹ "Vie-et Œuvres," Tome IV; Lettres Vol. I, p. 242.

² During the early days of his mission in the Chablais St. Francis could not even buy bread from the infuriated Calvinists, and one morning he was discovered hanging benumbed and almost dead from the branches of a high tree. He had tied himself to it the preceding night in order to escape the wolves, which, when the snow was deep, frequented the woods he had to pass through, and where he was frequently obliged to spend the night; for no payment would induce the terrified peasants, and much less those above them, to give him shelter. But his patience and heroism at last won their hearts and opened their minds to the truth. See Mackey, "Essays on St. Francis de Sales," Burns and Oates, p. 16.

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I pray God to make you holy, and me also, who am so far from this happiness.

“Just one word more : If you are not befriended, treasure this humiliation. Believe me, God looks with pleasure on her who is despised, and low estate willingly accepted is most pleasing to Him. God is good. May He visit our Visitation interiorly with His grace. May He strengthen it and establish it in solid humility, simplicity and mortification. Try to be always cheerful with that tranquil and holy joy of which the love of our humiliation is the root. I salute you, my very dear daughter in spirit, for in spirit we are inseparably united. Vive Jesu.—Amen.”¹

¹ “Œuvres,” Tome XVIII ; Lettres Vol. VIII. pp. 314-15.

CHAPTER XVII

OUR LADY'S CHAPLAIN

A STILL higher power than the Founders of her Order now came to the help of Mother de Bréchar. Canon de la Condre, a much-favoured son of the Immaculate Mother of God, whose life she directed, to whose devotion she gave warmth, and whose anxieties she undertook to relieve, was one day praying to her when he distinctly heard these words : " Give yourself to the service of my daughters." Condre knew not at first how to interpret his Heavenly Mother's bidding, but as she repeated the command again and again with accentuated clearness he felt impelled to act upon it, and yet knew not how to set about the accomplishment of her desire. He pondered within himself as to who these daughters might be, and receiving no enlightenment from his reflections he offered himself to the Prioress of the Sisters of St. Magdalen of the Order of Fontevraut, near Orleans. No sooner had he undertaken this new work than disquietude took possession of him by day and sleeplessness by night. " With the fulfilment of God's will cometh peace," he thought within himself, " and now peace hath deserted me ; this cannot then be His will for me." Acting upon this conclusion he left the Convent, God giving him only just light enough to

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make the outside darkness visible, but he stepped into it and felt it around him. Without well knowing whither he went or wherefore, he made his way to Moulins. There upon the day of his arrival he was told of the Daughters of Holy Mary, who had recently come to the town.

The name of this new Order together with his, to himself, unaccountable journey thither determined him to follow up the star of hope that flickered through this strange combination of events. Next morning he called at the Convent and asked to be allowed to say Mass in honour of Our Lady. In the Convent chapel a wonderful feeling of serenity took possession of him and a peace as remarkable as had been the unrest he experienced at Fontevraud. "Now at last," he thought, "I have found my true destination ; this is the place of my abode," and then and there he consecrated himself to the service of these Daughters of Our Lady for life. After Mass he called upon Mother de Bréchart, who saw in the account he gave her the loving hand of God to provide the Community with a chaplain and confessor, and she most willingly accepted of his services. During the sixteen or seventeen years Canon de la Condre served the Community he refused all remuneration save his maintenance, and he lived most frugally. When Mother de Bréchart tried at times to induce him to accept of some stipend he would hand it back to her, except, occasionally when he took from it some slight payment, saying pleasantly as he returned the rest, "The Lady I serve gives me such generous wages that I dare not, through respect for her, accept from you anything beyond a just sufficiency. Every day," he added, "I experience how few things are

Our Lady's Chaplain

necessary to a man who wishes to pass his life as a good disciple of Jesus Christ."

This holy priest died a victim to charity. Having devoted himself during the plague at Moulins to the attendance of the plague-stricken he caught the disease and succumbed to it. He left the Community sole heir to his little property, with a request to pray for his soul. To this signal mark of divine protection yet another consolation was given to Mother Jeanne Charlotte. In the year 1619 her beloved friend and Superior visited Moulins. Great was the joy of the sisters to see, most of them for the first time, their revered and humble Foundress. She remained with them for some days, and she tells us the only fault that she could find was a too frequent use of austerities and mortifications in the refectory. These she retrenched while exhorting her beloved daughters to preserve the spirit of simplicity and mortification by which they were already daily sanctifying their lives. She took leave of them, she tells us, with balm in her heart.

But this holy house of Moulins gave balm to other hearts besides that of Mother de Chantal. On Feast-days the ladies of the town met together at the monastery, when Mother de Bréhard would converse with them, yet keeping to the holy Bishop's golden rule for the Superiors of his Order, that a twelfth of their time may be willingly given to seculars, the remaining eleven parts of the day being employed in the care of their religious families.¹ The good Mother's clear and concise explanations of the Gospel precepts, the love for true Christian virtues she inculcated in these ladies, her simple

¹ "Spiritual Conferences," p. 311.

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catechetical instructions, brought such new light and with it such new life to their souls that they soon poured out all their troubles to her. This spiritual intercourse wrought a great change in them: they tell us they scarcely knew themselves and that, though the dear Mother was unconscious of it, they knew by her sympathetic understanding of their difficulties that she herself had had similar experience. Her perception of character was remarkable and of great service to her in dealing with souls both without and within the monastery. Like some other of these first Mothers of the Visitation there was something responsive about her that evoked confidence. The sisters of her Community came to her freely at any hour, and she encouraged them to do so and to tell her quite simply any faults they perceived in her. If in the wrong she owned to it at once, but if she thought she had not erred she explained the matter frankly as to an equal, and the sister went away with the pleasant sense of having acted rightly in speaking, and as her Mother wished. As to their own difficulties the sisters were wont to say to themselves on leaving her how foolish they had been not to have seen the way of acting she had pointed out, it all seemed so clear now. Yet notwithstanding this sisterly equality respect to her office as Superior was never lacking. It is no wonder, then, that we hear a little later of her having been forbidden exit from Moulins by the inhabitants lest they should lose her. For her presence had taught them what a modern writer so well expresses, that: "If society is to be permeated with religion there must be reservoirs of religion like those great storage places up among the hills which feed the pipes by which water is carried to every home in

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the city . . . where there will be . . . a special class of students of God, men and women whose primary and absorbing interest it is to work out the spiritual life in all its integrity.”¹

¹ “Wayside Sketches.”

CHAPTER XVIII

MADAME DU TERTRE

DURING her period of Superiorship Mother de Bréchart received eighteen new subjects, most of whom attained to great holiness in the Order. But amongst them was one destined to lay a heavier burden upon the good Mother's shoulders than any she had yet been called upon to bear. In the summer of 1619 Mother de Chantal and the holy Bishop were both in Paris. The former wrote to Mother Jeanne Charlotte desiring her to make ready to receive a young widow whom St. Francis wished her to look after, and "who," she says, "needs a home in which to live in retirement and ardently desires to find it with us. Welcome her and take care of her lovingly and cheerfully. She is a lady of quality and can give a good pension."¹ Such was the introduction of Madame du Tertre, *née* de Morville, the daughter of a wealthy and upright Paris merchant. Marie Aimée de Morville had been reared with unusual strictness, but being, before her marriage, of a compliant and amiable disposition, she had borne the severity of her parents gently and had recourse to Our Blessed Lady to help her therein. This devotion to the Blessed Mother of God she never wholly lost even in the most erring moments of her life, and to it,

¹ "Vie et Œuvres," Tome IV ; Lettres Vol. I, pp. 327-8.

Madame du Tertre

doubtless, may be attributed her final repentance. At a very early age she married a gentleman above her own station and so became "a lady of quality," as Mother de Chantal designates her. Once married and her own mistress, Marie Aimée looked back upon the enforced restrictions of her maidenhood with extreme repulsion and determined, now that she was free, thoroughly to enjoy life. Her husband's house became the centre of a brilliant circle in the days when the French salon was influencing society. Mademoiselle de Morville possessed, her contemporary historian tells us, a lovely face, a graceful figure, lively wit and attractive manners. On the death of her husband she was left at the age of twenty-two with two children. Far from this loss ending her gay life, it did but remove the last barrier to her full liberty, and she soon became an unenviable subject of notoriety in Parisian society. Her parents fearing for the credit of her children took advantage of a visit of St. Francis to the metropolis to induce their daughter to call upon him, in the hope that his influence might awaken in her a sense of duty and check her unedifying career. His reputation and distinction no doubt offered an attraction to the worldly young beauty, and she made no difficulty about visiting him.

When the holy Bishop (the gentleman Saint) looked upon this fair work of God's hand all the chivalry of his nature called upon him to do a knightly service to his King by the capture of her soul. He, so secure in his own faith that a sense of security breathed from his every word and act, soon drew forth from latent depths a confession of her frailties. She told him she was weary of having her own way, weary of her easy conquests in

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society—a society which he was aware her beauty and her charm held captive. The Saint let her speak, and the encouragement and sympathy for which he was distinguished led her to speak frankly and fully. Like his divine Master he upheld the broken reed. Instinct with God's grace and with the natural impulse of good breeding, he adumbrated, in that slow and measured manner of his, her most faulty ways—for there are shallows that only bear a surface view and miseries that it is wiser and more Christ-like not to plumb. Before their conversation ended his zeal and his fatherly manner had not failed to evoke in her heart a strange—yet, alas ! but a transient—longing to do battle with her lower self. As he told her of the love of God for sinners he fired her soul, and life seemed to have a new message for her. She asked him to guide her and said she would do whatever he willed. Such was the first meeting of Madame du Tertre with the holy Bishop of Geneva. It was followed by others. He introduced her to Mother de Chantal, to one of whose monasteries she begged to be allowed to retire that she might live away from the dangers of the world. The Monastery of Moulins was chosen by St. Francis to shelter this poor lady. The Saint's high opinion of Mother de Bréchart's wisdom and gift of sympathy are here again shown to us in his having chosen Moulins, out of the six Visitation Houses then established, for this difficult case. It was arranged that the parents of Madame du Tertre were to look after her children, and she was to come to the monastery in the quality of secular foundress or benefactress. On her arrival at the Convent she handed to the Mother Superior the following letter from the holy Bishop :

Madame du Tertre

“PARIS, *July* 1619.

“MY VERY DEAR DAUGHTER,

“You will, please God, receive this letter from the hands of Mademoiselle¹ du Tertre, a lady living here who is well known in this town. She has lately lost her husband and has made up her mind not to remarry. She thinks she cannot better keep her resolution than by entering the religious state, to which nevertheless she does not at present feel sufficiently attracted to engage herself. Yet has she so great a desire to see herself dwelling therein that she wishes to seek this grace from God in the place where she hopes He will be most likely to grant it to her. From amongst all the Congregations she has for this purpose chosen the Visitation. And because it makes special profession of cordial sweetness and charity she hopes God may more forcibly help her to attain her end there than elsewhere ; so our Mother and I send her to you. She will tell you quite frankly our other reasons for choosing you beyond that of our considering your special fitness. But this one reason I will tell you as you might not easily believe it from her lips. It is that we greatly desire her to be led to a true knowledge and practice of the devout life. Up to this she has been her own mistress, and from this tyrannical subjection she must be gently, lovingly, and prudently set free, so that the gracious yoke and sweet mastery which the Holy Spirit desires to possess over her soul may dominate it and she may be enabled to enter on the true way of the spiritual life in a thorough and practical manner. We place with confidence this work in your

¹ Appellation formerly given to all married women who were not noble or who, being noble, had no title.

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hands, knowing that you will willingly undertake it and that you will understand how to employ suitable means for carrying it out. She is quite candid, wishing to rely entirely on the grace of God, full of desire to let herself be governed by some friendly hand. She is tired of governing herself. I admire this good quality in her, and indeed it makes me hope that she will one day be a faithful servant of God. She has asked for no exemptions from the rigours of enclosure nor from the regulations for the good order of your house, such as those about speaking to strangers, giving or receiving letters, and all like safeguards. In fact, I am telling you too many things, you, who understand me so well, dearest daughter. To conclude I recommend her to your gentleness and prudence, to your zeal and condescension, to your vigilant and gracious guidance. . . .

“Your very humble brother, uncle, and servant,

✠ FRANCIS, BISHOP OF GENEVA.”¹

¹ “Œuvres,” Tome XVIII ; Lettres Vol. VII, pp. 411 *sq.*

CHAPTER XIX

NEVERS

EARLY in the year 1620, the two daughters of M. de Bonsidat, a gentleman of Nevers, wished to become Visitation Nuns. Their father was about to take them to the Convent of Moulins when a neighbouring friend, the Baron de Langres, suggested to him that they should have a Visitation Monastery of their own at Nevers and that his daughters might help towards its establishment. Nothing loth to have his children nearer to him, M. de Bonsidat responded to the idea, and taking his girls to Moulins opened negotiations with Mother de Bréhard. She referred the matter to the holy Founders, who offered no objection. Madame du Tertre, who was now living as a secular in the monastery, heard of this gentleman's arrival and privately interviewed him. For, notwithstanding the edifying resolutions with which she had armed herself on entering, she was already giving much trouble in the house, wherein little passed that did not come to her knowledge. M. de Bonsidat told her in all innocence of the proposed Foundation and later informed her that Mother de Bréhard was to be the Superior of the new house. Upon hearing this piece of news Madame du Tertre resolved to become the Foundress of Nevers. She offered thirty thousand livres on condition that she was allowed to accompany her much loved Mother Jeanne Charlotte. St. Francis acceded to her

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request, as he had already done to that of the Bishop of Nevers and the authorities of that town, who had sent him a petition asking that Mother de Bréchart should be Superior of the new house. As soon, however, as her proposed departure became known at Moulins it aroused the bitterest opposition on the part of the town officials, who now thoroughly appreciated the worth of the good Mother and absolutely refused to let her go. The young widow, too, with her large dowry, they were resolved to keep, and seeing their determination to keep Mother de Bréchart she was now nothing loth to stay. The Marshal de Saint-Géran wrote himself to St. Francis putting the claims of Moulins very forcibly, and beseeching the holy Bishop to prevent such a calamity as the removal of Mother de Bréchart. The Saint, who had given the Bishop of Nevers permission to have her, could not unsay what he had said, so he gave an obedience to Mother Paule Jéronyme de Monthoux to go from Annecy to Moulins and take up the Superiorship there in order to free Mother Jeanne Charlotte. Upon hearing this M. de Palierne wrote direct to St. Francis, who answered as follows: "When I passed through Moulins I saw no disposition on the part of Mademoiselle¹ du Tertre to make the choice upon which she has since decided. But some two months ago I learnt by one of her letters that she had pledged herself to Our Lord not only to become a religious but likewise to erect a house at Nevers, and I, who had no idea that she had intended her money for Moulins and never even thought of such a thing save under very uncertain, indefinite conditions, looked upon her choice as good, as

¹ As in original. Old French.

Nevers

indeed it was. It being thought advisable to send a couple of sisters to Moulins I did so without much consideration, not foreseeing that it would be looked upon as unjust to remove one [Mother de Bréchart] who was under no obligation to stay where she was or to put another in her place who was fully capable of the charge. This, Sir, is all, up to the present, that I have done in the matter. Now Mademoiselle du Tertre writes to me that she has the authority of M. le Mareschal¹ and Madame de Mareschale de Saint-Géran to withdraw her first project, and that capable theologians assure her that she is in conscience free to remain where she is. Being ignorant of her reasons for such decision, and having no claim as to the disposal of her means and no wish to question the advice of conscience she has received from those who have the knowledge requisite for this decision, which I have not, I have nothing to say on the point. But over and above all this there is the annoyance caused to good Sister de Bréchart for having given her word to the gentlemen of Nevers and now being unable to keep it. To my mind there is nothing more distressing to a well-bred woman than such a position. But there is no remedy for it. To conclude, I will tell you what I have written to both these daughters. To Mademoiselle du Tertre I said that as to her conscience she should do what her director told her ; and to Mother de Bréchart that she should endure all the consequences of this counsel and patiently accept the humiliation it entails, bearing in mind that the stings of bees are felt more than those of a fly, and yet in spite of the stings we cannot help loving them on account of their honey. The

¹ As in original. Old French.

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Angels themselves were often of contrary opinions (Dan. x, 13) and resisted one another without violating the laws of charity.

“With heartfelt respect and begging of you, Sir, to continue your kindness to these daughters,

“I am yours, etc.”¹

Mother Jeanne Charlotte keenly felt her powerlessness to fulfil the promise made in her regard by St. Francis to the Bishop and gentlemen of Nevers, but it was impossible to withstand the opposition of Moulins. Amidst all this turmoil she preserved an heroic silence, although complaints about her conduct reached her from many sides. Upon hearing that the Mother of her predilection was not to leave Moulins, Madame du Tertre relinquished the idea of going to Nevers or of being in any way its Foundress. She demanded back the ten thousand livres she had already given, which had been spent on the purchase of a house and garden, while the Bishop of Nevers asserted that no spiritual Foundation could be made without a temporal one, and refused to return the money. So did the matter ferment: the Saint-Gérans and the Moulins authorities on the one side, and on the other the Baron de Langres, the Bishop and gentlemen of Nevers. Mother de Chantal then took up her pen and wrote as follows to M. de Palierne: “. . . There is much to be said on both sides. Yet in consideration of Madame du Tertre’s resolve to live with us, candidly, it seems to me only reasonable that what she has freely given should be left with the house of Nevers, otherwise she will have to make a virtue of

¹ “Œuvres,” Tome XIX ; Lettres Vol. IX, pp. 293-4.

Nevers

necessity, and we should be sorry to have to insist upon this. But to me the kernel of the matter lies in this : the authorities of Nevers only gave permission for the establishment of the Convent because Madame du Tertre accompanied her petition by a promise of ten thousand livres, and upon the strength of this promise the sisters have been received, the property purchased, and a third of the money already paid for it. Later, possession was taken of the house, the Installation of the community took place by the Bishop, who instituted enclosure and gave permission to reserve the Blessed Sacrament. Since that day the Divine Office has been regularly recited. So the Foundation is, as you see, fully established. How, then, can Madame du Tertre, having made herself responsible for the financial support of the house, now draw back without upsetting the whole affair ? For, as his Lordship of Nevers has upon two occasions very plainly informed me, the spiritual Foundation cannot exist without the temporal. Can you not see, Sir, that consent to this young lady's wishes would mean ruin to one of our houses in order to ensure abundance to the other house ? . . . Permit me, my very dear Brother, to say that the property is not ours to divide. As Madame du Tertre no longer wishes to abide by her first arrangement she may be at liberty to take back what she has given, but I cannot see how this conforms to justice. Still, disregarding justice, the Bishop of Geneva would certainly not approve of our retaining one teston¹ that was not freely given. Of that there can be no question. But as she has entered amongst us and as our house of Moulins is content with the twenty thousand francs she

¹ An old French coin.

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brings, as they consider it sufficient to provide the young lady with all she requires, and as it is an affair of our own houses, is it not better to follow the advice of his lordship of Geneva and share the ten thousand livres between the two houses?—or at least leave ten thousand francs to Nevers so that that house may not be ruined? Our sisters of Nevers decided to go to that town because this guarantee was given them by the Moulins sisters. In the Name of God, how can we possibly put into the power of the Bishop of Nevers such a favourable pretext for refusing to let the sisters stay? Oh, do you not see, my very dear Brother, how shameful it would be and how prejudicial to the service of God? The agreement has been more to the advantage of this young lady than to us, although the houses belong to us and we have the principal interest in them. For she has all the privileges at Moulins with her twenty thousand francs that she could hope for were it fifty thousand; and, besides, in virtue of her title of benefactress, she is free, when there is any good reason, to go to Nevers and be treated there in every way just as she is at Moulins. This, in my opinion, is a very proper arrangement, and I humbly beg of you to induce her to accept it. Use your influence with her for the honour and glory of God and His Blessed Mother and also for the love you bear our little Institute. Madame du Tertre was anxious to know the wishes of the Bishop of Geneva and he has acceded to her request. Let her, then, accommodate herself to his view, and live in peace. I can see no other way of settling this affair than to appeal to you, and I tell you frankly that I can do nothing more with his lordship of Nevers. He holds out for the full sum

Nevers

and writes about it in a very matter-of-fact way. I answer as God directs me through His grace. I am determined to place all in His hands, and remain in peace and submission to whatever Divine Providence ordains.”¹

With equal frankness she wrote to Madame du Tertre, concluding her letter with these words: “Our poor sisters are grieved to the heart at having to listen to a style of conversation to which they are unaccustomed. The peace of God is more to them than such things. Let them enjoy it I pray you.”²

This painful affair was concluded in accordance with the views of the holy Founders, after which Madame du Tertre, giving hopes of amendment, was allowed to take the habit under the name of Sister Marie Aimée de Morville. At the end of her year’s novitiate she made her profession. Some exemptions and privileges were allowed her by the authority of the Archbishop of Lyons, who administered the See of Autun at the time, and by the advice of the holy Founders. They, indeed, would have stretched any point to secure the salvation of this erring soul, and their marvellous consideration for her is significant as a typical example of the lengths to which they wished charity to be extended in their Order, though after St. Francis’s death we find St. Chantal acknowledging that they had been too gentle and tolerant in this instance.

Mother Paule Jéronyme de Monthoux, who had come to take Mother de Bréchar’d’s place at Moulins, had, on the previous July 20 been sent as Superior to Nevers.

¹ “Vie et Œuvres,” Tome IV ; Lettres Vol. I, pp. 460 *sqq.*

² *Ibid.* p. 459.

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Indeed St. Francis could not have acted otherwise, for the authorities of Moulins refused to allow Mother de Bréhard an exit from the town, and for ten days they imprisoned the rich young widow in Moulins Castle, an exciting experience, we can well believe, by no means distasteful to her. One they would not lose because of her virtue, and the other because of her money. Meanwhile Mother Paule Jéronyme, who had arrived with her sisters at Nevers, was very rudely treated. The gentlemen of the town, in their disappointment at not getting Mother de Bréhard, allowed their resentment to master their good-breeding, and asked many impertinent questions. The new Mother had unfortunately a very youthful appearance, and upon seeing her they protested that the Bishop had sent a child to govern their monastery, and asked her her age. But soon finding that she was no child in judgment and capacity they began to readjust their opinions, and before long were devoted to her. So did another French town yield to the indefinable charm of the teaching and doctrine of the holy Bishop of Geneva. Mother de Monthoux governed the Nevers Community till 1625, when she was called thence to found a monastery at Blois, and add yet another to an ever-increasing number of Visitation Houses. Rapidly were these Convents becoming centres from which radiated a new spirit of devotion, a devotion that warmed the hearts of men and wakened them to the lovable and humanly tender aspect of Catholicism, so much needed in France at this period. For Jansenism had frozen up many a heart, and led many a man almost to despair of pleasing so exacting a Being as the God of these heretics.

CHAPTER XX

MOTHER DE BIGNY'S VOW

Just at the time of the Nevers Foundation Madame de Gouffier appears to have been in a more than usually unsettled state of mind as to a vocation in life, and having consulted St. Francis we find him replying to her as follows: ". . . You are neither fit to cope with the dangers of a life in the world nor with the constraints of religious life." Consequently he advised her to live near some Visitation Convent, where she should be able to practise certain exercises of devotion, and thus have the opportunity of satisfying her mind, which," he continues, "has such a horror of submission and of ties of obedience, and finds it so difficult to meet souls to its liking, and is so sharp-witted in finding what to say to others, and so resentful."¹ Later in this same letter the Saint implores of her to put an end to her interminable lawsuits with her family, and tells her that the money she spends on them would be enough to support her. We can picture Mother de Bréhard with this troublesome Madame de Gouffier practically living in the Convent, although her apartments were, we conclude from the foregoing letter, outside the enclosure—a woman whose quarrelsome and domineering spirit was capable of setting aflame the most peaceful and tranquil of homes ;

¹ "Œuvres," Tome XIX ; Lettres Vol. IX, p. 44.

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while within the house she had Madame du Tertre, who did in malice actually thrice attempt to set on fire and burn down the monastery, and who, after a short period of self-restraint during her novitiate, fell back into her old disorders. These St. Francis and Mother de Chantal speak of in various letters, two short extracts from which we will quote, one written indeed before her novitiate, but the other many years later. “. . . I have been to Moulins,” says St. Francis (October 1619), “where Made-moiselle du Tertre is giving full scope to her vanity. Her room is hung with tapestry and her bed with silk, but we must bear with her for a little longer, for there are hopes of her amending.” And Mother de Chantal writes: “Our holy Founder¹ used to say that we should endure the weaknesses of our neighbour. But malice, scandal, the overthrow of a Convent—O God, he never said that we ought to suffer such things! This poor creature lives in her own way, is served and lodged as she desires, dresses as seems good to her, and without regard to Rule. Her desire is to domineer over everyone, and she submits to no restraint. If this did not disedify we might still bear with it, but I believe it is our duty to tell her plainly that we can no longer in conscience tolerate such disorders. Alas! what a lesson to be more prudent in future.”

Mother de Chantal's letters to this erring nun and to her successive superiors are, throughout, redolent of the spirit of toleration. Sister Marie Aimée had induced the Bishop of Autun to allow a certain number of her relatives to enter the monastery to visit her. This privilege she grossly abused, and when her Mother Superior for-

¹ St. Francis died December 22, 1622.

Mother de Bigny's Vow

bade her to continue such irregularities, Marie Aimée prejudiced the Bishop against her. Being, however, unable to continue these visits of her friends, she arranged meetings with them in the hedges that surrounded the Convent grounds, for the grounds were not yet regularly enclosed, and wherever there was a breach in the hedge it sufficed for a parlour for Marie Aimée. Her correspondence, which she so edifyingly told St. Francis, she wished to be under the supervision of her Mother Superior, she carried on surreptitiously. And this to such an extent as to obtain from Rome Bulls of secularisation, in order to enable her to go to law with her family. Needless to say, her relatives gave no helping hand to her reappearance in the Parisian world, although Mother de Chantal would have freely, and now thankfully, let her go. This trickery and deceit in regard to her correspondence was a constant subject of complaint in the Foundress's letters. Again and again she tenderly and strongly appeals to Sister Marie Aimée to reform her ways, but alas! for many years without effect.

Such was the burden laid upon the shoulders of Mother Jeanne Charlotte. Truly God balances His gifts of nature and of grace, and in the disposal of the latter nicely and delicately measures our strength. We, poor feeble ones, in our nursery learn the helpful lesson that "Little things on little wings bear little souls to heaven." As we get on in years we comfort ourselves with the old rhyme. But great souls like Mother de Bréhard are called upon to bear sufferings the magnitude of which is such as we can hardly bring home to our imagination. From her earliest years her feet had been set upon the

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royal, hard, high road of the Cross and never left it. We seek pleasant bypaths, short cuts, shaded alleys to soothe and soften our pilgrimage, but easy ways were not for her. She looked straight to God always, and sought without deviation, not His glory only, but consistently and unwaveringly His greater glory. She strove simply to please Him in the smallest details of her life : and to have been obliged to deal with the finesse, the duplicity, the underhand ways, the narrow world of Madame de Gouffier and Sister Marie Aimée de Morville must have been a true martyrdom to her. St. Francis knew he could count upon her wisdom and her discretion, but for his high estimate how dearly had she not to pay? It is consoling to find that both these gifted but erring spirits died holy deaths. After three weeks of great suffering patiently borne Madame de Gouffier went to God on December 22, 1621 ; on August 27, 1633, Marie Aimée de Morville died repentant.

Ten years had passed since Mother de Bréchart had left Moulins to govern elsewhere, but this unfortunate sister had grown no better. In 1630, Mother Marie Angélique de Bigny was elected Superior at Moulins. Taking over her charge at a time when Marie Aimée was bringing more than usual discredit on the Convent, the new Mother offered to God her body, her health, her life, and her reputation, to suffer in any way that seemed good to Him if He would grant her in return the conversion of this soul. God accepted her offering, and exacted from her in later years the full price of the compact she had made.¹

¹ Unpublished "History of the Foundation of Moulins." See also "Selected Letters," p. 798.

Mother de Bigny's Vow

Psychologically Sister de Morville's character is of interest. At first sight one wonders how a girl, apparently so gentle and yielding when under her parents' severe discipline, could have so completely changed after her marriage. But, until her marriage, at a very early age, she was not probably aware of the power she possessed in her beauty, wit, and attractive manners, and having gained this knowledge through her intercourse with Parisian society, none the best of preceptors, she looked back, we are told, upon the restraints of her girlhood with extreme disgust. In regarding her end let us refer to her beginning. She had faith throughout, but fear evidently dominated her character. She was obedient to her parents, not from love, but from fear. Then came a life of complete liberty together with knowledge of her power. From this life she was drawn, by the virtue and the grace of the holy Bishop of Geneva, to retire into his monastery at Moulins. Henceforth St. Francis and St. Chantal, consistently with the spirit of their Order, sought unremittingly to win her to God by gentleness. But, judging by the unprincipled advantage she took of this leniency, their charity was, humanly speaking, as pearls to swine, until Mother de Bigny made her heroic offering. Soon after she had done so God, in His great mercy, sent Marie Aimée a remarkable dream, which terrified her lest she should be buried in hell. Again, under the influence of fear she turned to Him. This dream so penetrated her that she asked next morning to be allowed to re-enter the novitiate, to remake her vows and to make public reparation for the scandal she had given in Moulins. To these requests Mother de Bigny gladly acceded, and

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the penitent nun, at the choir grille, in the presence of the chief inhabitants of Moulins, made a public act of reparation, tore up her privileges of Foundress and renewed her vows. Though selfish and fickle, Marie Aimée de Morville undoubtedly possessed a certain ardour of temperament, and this must have helped to carry her through her somewhat dramatic self-imposed public penance. He who winks at the sins of men for the sake of their repentance¹ is not only more kindly in His judgment, more tolerant of failings than we, but once we turn to Him He causes the very weaknesses of our character to be no longer hindrances but distinct helps in our progress. This poor sinner had now at last really cast out the devils within her ; but that was not all. With the help of divine grace she kept them out until God called her to Himself. Having conquered her by faith and by fear He now drew her by love. Her subsequent humility, which was evident to all, must have been deepened and strengthened by the thought of the marvellous charity exercised towards her. And this not only by the Founders and Superiors of her Order, but likewise, and far more wonderful in its way, by the Community of Moulins. For thirteen years she had brought upon them uncalled-for and almost unheard-of sufferings, and yet, while patiently bearing with her, these sisters, in order to leave no stone unturned in their loving plans of winning her to God, had themselves elected her as one of the councillors of the Superior, while the Superior² chose her as her coadjutrix.

¹ "Winking at the sins of men for the sake of repentance and sparing them."—Wisdom xi.

² Mother Marie Constance de Bressand, 1625.

Mother de Bigny's Vow

After fifteen months of genuine and humble repentance Sister Marie Aimée de Morville died, suddenly, as had been foretold to her in her dream. While speaking to Mother de Bigny she fell at her feet calling out. "My God, have mercy upon me!" They were her last words; in half an hour she was in the presence of her all-merciful Judge.

Who but St. Francis would have such a woman in his newly founded Order? "The optimist," says a thinker of our day, "is a better reformer than the pessimist."¹

¹ G. K. Chesterton.

CHAPTER XXI

1622

MOTHER DE BRÉCHARD had now completed her full term of Superiorship, according to the rule which enacts that no Superior can hold office consecutively for more than six years ; and on November 4, 1622, Sister Marie Hélène Chastellux took her place.

Marie Hélène was one of the first members to join the Moulins Foundation in those early days when it was neglected and despised. So highly did Mother Jeanne Charlotte esteem this young girl that in writing to Mother de Chantal she compares her arrival at such a moment to the coming of St. Bernard to Citeaux. "In birth," she writes, "his equal, in virtue and talent almost rivalling him." Her enthusiastic eulogium ends with these words : "I foresee no other difficulty in directing her than that of restraining her ardour, lest advancing too rapidly she outstrip grace." Great, then, must have been her consolation in seeing one in whom she had such entire confidence elected to succeed her. She remained some months with the community to help and encourage the new Mother, for whom she had already successfully accomplished all pioneer work. The greater part of the monastery had been built by her. But before suitably housing the sisters she had fittingly enshrined her Divine Master, for to do so had been her first care

as soon as ever the financial state of the Community made it possible. All her life this good Mother had had such a tender devotion to the Blessed Sacrament that when passing to and fro during the day her loving desire drew her in spite of herself to the tabernacle. "This attraction," she tells us, "was so strong that I fain would run after the odour of His ointments,¹ and to compensate for my inability to remain in His holy presence He would suggest to me words of love which gave me such a realisation of His greatness and my nothingness that in my effort to worship Him in this mystery of condescension I felt as if my heart literally *became like wax melting within me.*"² "Sometimes the soul," says St. John of the Cross,³ "without any effort of its own, is conscious of a most sweet interior inebriation, and of the Divine love burning within as David saith: "My heart grew hot within me, and in my meditation a fire shall flame out."⁴

And St. Francis in his own incomparable way compares the soul in God's presence to a mirror into which the more attentively we look the more it reflects back the living image mirrored therein; for the more God casts His gracious eye upon our soul which is made to His living image the more is the soul in loving attention fixed upon Him, answering back according to its little powers every advance of love which He deigns to make it. So does every act of love bring with it an increase of love, and charity ever wax stronger. Who does not hold this

¹ Cant. i, 3.

² Psalm xxi, 15.

³ Lewis, "Saint John of the Cross," Vol. II, *A Spiritual Canticle*, p. 135. Longmans, London, 1864.

⁴ Psalm xxxviii, 4.

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to be true let him, the Council of Trent says, be anathema.¹

This year, too, was of sad note in the Order, for at its close the great and holy Founder died.

All who have read the lives of St. Francis and St. Chantal are familiar with the holy Bishop's last days at Lyons, where he had been obliged to go in attendance on the French Court. But a few little byway traits of the sweet Saint during those final days on earth which we find in the unpublished "History of the Foundation of the First Monastery of Lyons," will not be unwelcome to the reader.

In the beginning of December Mother de Chantal went to Lyons from Dijon to meet St. Francis. With the exception of a momentary meeting the previous October, she had not seen him for three years. During that time she had kept him conversant with the affairs of the Order and had received many letters of advice from him on its well-being, spiritual and material. But for the more intimate manifestation of her own lifelong sufferings of soul she looked forward to a personal interview, and now after all these weary years of struggle the longed-for moment had come at last. She had already been ten days at Lyons and the overwhelming demands made upon the poor Bishop by the Royal Family and Court had, so far, made it impossible for him to have a talk with her. At length one day finding himself free for a few hours he came to see her. "Now, Mother," he said, as she entered the parlour, "I have some hours free, which of us shall speak first?" "I, if you please," she quickly replied; "my soul has need

¹ "Traité de l'Amour de Dieu," Livre III, chap. 2.



ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

(Doctor of the Church)

*Authentic portrait, taken from the original, painted in 1618,
and now in the possession of the Sisters of the Visitation of Turin.*

of being reviewed by you." With gentleness and gravity the Bishop, we are told, checked her eagerness. It must have been at this moment that, as the Annals record, one of the Bishop's attendants began to sing while awaiting his master outside the Convent parlour door. The holy Bishop, apparently unaware of the lackey's accomplishment, said with astonishment, "Mother, Peter is singing!" But Mother de Chantal continued speaking with her usual earnestness while the poor lackey outside, little thinking that his master heard him, went on whiling away the time with his song. Then St. Francis said again, "Mother, hearken to Peter singing! What do you think of that?" "Eh, my Lord," the good Mother answered somewhat petulantly, "let Peter sing, and let us make the most of the time we have!" Upon this the holy Bishop, who knew well that this valiant soul was directed by God Himself and needed none other, rose, went to the door and opened it, no doubt in reality to moderate her holy eagerness to make known to him her state of conscience; but, ostensibly, the better to hear the song. Coming back he said with peculiar gravity, "Mother, let us leave these personal matters until we meet at Annecy, and let us now take advantage of having our dear Cadette¹ with us to speak of the affairs of the Institute." Mother de Chantal without one word of appeal folded up her personal notes and opened those she had made on the Institute. For four hours they discussed plans and matters concerning the Order, calling in Mother de Blonay for her advice. The interview ended, Mother de Chantal, at the request of the Bishop, left at once to visit on her return journey

¹ A pet name given by St. Francis to Mother de Blonay.

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Grenoble and some of the newly founded Visitation Houses.¹

As she rode from Lyons and looked back upon the lengthening shadows of that fair Provençal city receding from her view she thought of the hopes that had been shut up in it for her ten days before. The disappointment took hold of that great human heart of hers and she gave way under it ; an inexpressible sense of sadness took possession of her. Had the Bishop but let her speak out her troubles how different, how happy she might at this moment have felt—whereas—but here with a strong effort she checked the rising thought and turning straight to God accepted the cross direct from Him. No word of censure or complaint passed her lips. Taking up her Psalter, as was her wont when inward troubles seemed about to overwhelm her, she deliberately chanted the twenty-sixth Psalm, *Dominus illuminatio*, repeating over and over again the verse *Quoniam pater meus et mater mea dereliquerunt me : Dominus autem assumpsit me*, until with the repetition her courage revived and she was once more mistress of herself.²

The next meeting of these two Saints was that witnessed in vision by St. Vincent de Paul on the death of the holy Foundress.

Upon another day the Duke of Nemours came to visit the Bishop at the cottage of the Convent gardener, where the Saint insisted upon lodging, and where, by the way, we are told, the chimney smoked dreadfully. Whilst speaking with the Duke the small daughter of

¹ Unpublished "History of the Foundation of the First Monastery of Lyons."

² "Vie et Oeuvres," Vol. I, p. 212.

the gardener made her way through his Highness's suite and signed to the Bishop that she wanted to kiss his pectoral cross. Stooping down to the child he satisfied her desire and she ran off quite happy, while he continued his conversation with the Duke.

Yet one more incident to add to the limning of the portrait. The Fathers of the *Grand Collège* at Lyons invited the Bishop to preach on the Second Sunday of Advent. Wishing to spare him all unnecessary fatigue in his suffering state of health, Mother de Blonay suggested that he should drive to the college chapel. St. Francis would not hear of it. "It would be a fine thing," he said, "to see me arriving in a carriage to preach on the penance of St. John the Baptist and the poverty of the Evangelist."¹

Such are a few of the simple details of the Saint's last days. There is no better object lesson left us of his spirit than that portrayed in his last interview with St. Chantal. In common with other founders of religious Orders St. Francis desired for his daughters as great a participation of the Divine life as is possible here below, in virtue of which participation the soul becomes capable of knowing, loving, and enjoying God as He knows, loves, and enjoys Himself—so to live is to lead a Divine life. There is no other way of becoming holy, of attaining to sanctity, than by imitation of our great Model, and she who is the nearest replica of Jesus Christ is the most holy. The essential elements of this holiness are: a purity that avoids all sin, all imperfection, all attachment, however slight, to any created thing,

¹ Unpublished "History of the Foundation of the First Monastery of Lyons."

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and an abiding, undeviating, equable adherence to God.¹ Ever aiming at this goal, St. Francis and St. Chantal led their spiritual children not so much by precept as by the all-powerful unwritten law of example, the example of their own lives. And if the holy Founder of the Visitation called for self-denial from those he guided, even such heroic self-denial as that here demanded of St. Chantal, there was always a soothing unguent in his manner of obtaining it, that, even in the asking, softened the asperity of the sacrifice and that, as the years went by, mellowed in the memory.

¹ See Marmion, "Le Christ : Vie de l'Ame," Paris, St.-Augustin; Desclée, de Brouwer et Cie, 1922, chap. i.

CHAPTER XXII

PROPOSED FOUNDATION AT RIOM

IN the summer of 1622, Madame de Chazeron,¹ daughter of the Marshal de Saint-Géran, spent three months in the Convent of Moulins, where she had come to seek comfort and spiritual help at a time of domestic trouble and dissatisfaction with her married life. During this visit she received such support and such prudent guidance in regard to her home life and duties that upon leaving she proposed to her husband that they should found a monastery of the Visitation at their own home at Riom. He gladly encouraged any project that might perpetuate the good effects of the influence of Mother de Bréchar, for whom his wife had conceived a great reverence and affection. The matter was laid before St. Francis, who warmly approved, but he did not consider it a propitious moment to make the Foundation. The Carmelite Mothers had lately founded there and ought, he said, to be allowed sufficient time to establish themselves well in the town, otherwise the coming of another Order might interfere with the success of the daughters of St. Teresa ; so the Foundation was postponed. Two years later Madame de Chazeron was called to Court, and before taking up her duties in attendance on Queen Marie de' Medici she was anxious to arrange definitely about the Riom foundation, as now ample time had been

¹ La Comtesse de Chazeron, Maréchale de Saint-Luc.

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given to secure every advantage to the Carmelites. A contract was drawn up at Moulins, September 18, 1622, by which the Count and Countess de Chazeron undertook to provide a sum of money to purchase a house and premises and to allow a thousand livres a year until such time as ten religious should be professed, whose dowries should suffice for the maintenance of the Community. It is pleasant to learn from the Annals that these noble benefactors did not even confine themselves to this generous allowance, but supplied the sisters with wood, wine, and numberless other things. Before the contract was signed Madame de Chazeron had with much difficulty procured the requisite permission from the town authorities of Riom. M. de Murat and M. Valette, the King's procurator, had indeed most willingly given their assent, but the municipality made endless difficulties, and all the influence of M. de Murat and M. Valette was powerless to procure it. The town councillors called a meeting to discuss the affair, at the conclusion of which they sent a note to Madame de Chazeron thanking her for her good intentions, but declining to receive the Visitation Sisters as the town was already overburdened with Religious Orders.

Madame de Chazeron, forewarned of this refusal, had recourse to the authority of the Queen Mother, who, as Dowager Duchess of Auvergne, had a right to intervene, and who at once sent a remonstrance to these gentlemen couched in courteous but forcible language. This protest was most unexpected and caused great excitement in the town. The members of the municipality sheltered themselves behind the will of the people, which they said they could not oppose, although it was well known that

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any opposition of the people there may have been had been created and fostered entirely by them. They called a second meeting, at which, notwithstanding all their efforts, the plurality of votes was in favour of the Foundation. Upon this an unwilling assent was given, and Mother de Bréhard lost no time in acting. She wrote to the Bishop of Clermont to obtain his approval and received from him in reply a gracious and affectionate welcome to his diocese. Quietly and unperceived she and her sisters then took up their residence at Riom. But the town councillors, distressed beyond measure at the results of the voting, at once brought forward new difficulties. They demanded security, and then objected to those who offered themselves as such. The Bishop, who had been entirely in favour of the nuns, now shifted his ground lest he might offend not only these officials, but also a very powerful lady,¹ his own aunt, who was violently opposed to the Foundation. Under pressure of this storm the sisters were compelled for a short time to return to the Visitation Monastery of Montferrant, from whence, however, they soon went back in secrecy to Riom. The feeling grew to such intensity on both sides that at last a third public meeting was called, and upon that day the opposition worked themselves into such a state of excitement, the Annals humorously tell us, that "seeing the uproar of the town one would have thought some great upheaval of the State had taken place, some acute national crisis, the result of which rested upon the decision

¹ Madame de Montferrant, mother of the Countess de Dalet, who became a Visitation nun after many years of bitter persecution and cruelty on the part of her ambitious parent. This lady, for the aggrandisement of her family, tried to compel her daughter to assent to a distinguished second marriage which had been proposed to her.

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of the town councillors of Riom, and had to be determined by their votes," whereas it was only the question as to whether a few poor women should or should not be allowed to say their prayers in peace and quiet and, hidden away from the world, strive to draw down by their lives of self-sacrifice God's blessing upon those who had not time to pray for themselves. At this eventful meeting the opposition cleverly contrived to hinder the attendance of those who were in favour of the nuns, with the result that at its close Mother de Bréchard was informed that force would be used unless she and her sisters at once withdrew of their own accord from the town. The brave-hearted, patient woman throughout all these seven or eight weary months of turmoil had kept both her head and her footing. She had, indeed, now to leave the house which had been purchased for the Foundation, but in doing so she begged and obtained permission to be allowed to lodge in another part of the town while awaiting final arrangements. Here for four months the sisters lived as in their own monastery, carrying out as far as possible all the observances of their Rule. This lodging was in the bourgeois quarter of the town, and Providence arranged that it should happen to be the very house in which one of their most bitter enemies had his office. His window overlooked the nuns' room, and regardless of decorum, all day long he closely watched them as they recited the Office and performed their other devotional exercises. In a short time this man from an enemy became an admiring friend. But others still contrived new plans of ridding the town permanently of these religious, and meanwhile the Bishop turned entirely against them.

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This increasing opposition gave much uneasiness to Mother de Bréhard, and no longer feeling her old confidence she consulted in her perplexity a Jesuit father, who gave her great encouragement, bidding her push on, for contradictions, he assured her, were a sign of God's blessing on her work. With renewed courage she now bethought her to write the whole wearisome tale to Madame de Chazeron, who perchance might tell the Queen Mother. The result of this move was all that could be desired. The Bishop and the municipality received communications from her Majesty electric in their effect. All opposition vanished like smoke; the Bishop veered round, and became once more the nuns' friend; the municipality no longer dared offer resistance, and a contract was drawn up permitting the Foundation. But here again one last effort was made to ruin the good work by inserting a clause prejudicial to the ecclesiastical authorities. This contract was read to Mother de Bréhard, who, detecting the snare, refused to sign it. However, being pressed to take advantage of so propitious a wind of public opinion, she (afterwards) signed, taking, however, the wise precaution of writing under her signature, "subject to the good pleasure of the Bishop of Clermont." To these words the Bishop's attention was drawn, and admiring her prudence he the more willingly welcomed her to Riom.

CHAPTER XXIII

FOUNDATION AT RIOM ACHIEVED

IT is clear from Mother de Chantal's letters that she did not approve of Mother Jeanne Charlotte pursuing the projected Foundation of Riom in face of so much prolonged opposition. Unfortunately we have none of Mother de Bréhard's letters to the venerable Foundress during this time, so it is very difficult fairly to judge in how far she may or may not have acted independently of her. But as upon every other occasion in her life she gave the fullest and most unqualified obedience it is not likely that in this instance she failed to do so. It must be remembered also that letters in those days were usually conveyed by hand, and the interval between sending and delivery was very uncertain. So that Mother de Chantal, who received information regarding this matter from other quarters besides Mother de Bréhard, and probably not altogether unbiased information, might not have given her daughter such decided advice to relinquish her undertaking had she known the continually changing aspect of affairs at Riom. For even that bitterest of foes, Madame de Montferrant, when she saw the result of her action, softened, and offered the nuns those lodgings in the bourgeois quarter of the town which, as we have seen, they occupied for four months. At first Mother de Chantal's letters are encouraging and full of sympathy

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—indeed, sympathy she never ceased to give, even when she urged so strongly the desirability of withdrawing from Riom. She writes from Annecy : “Your letter, dearest Daughter, truly makes me shudder. I marvel at the greatness of your cross, yet at the same time I adore Him who permits all this that you may suffer innocently as He suffered bitterness and contempt of every kind, the revilings and the outcries of the people against Him. And this not only in His sacred body but likewise in His divine soul. Beloved Daughter, let us try to imitate the sweetness and patience with which He bore all ; let us dearly love this little morsel of the Cross. It will draw down upon your house great blessings, for your heart which has so long cherished suffering will make good use of this storm. He who sends you such an arduous time in body and mind will give you strength to endure it and to draw from it the fruit He has destined for you.”¹

Again she writes from Annecy : “Alas ! I am so grieved that I fall to weeping when I think of my poor dear companion of old days in the midst of such troubles and such contempt, such humiliations and contradictions—when I see her overwhelmed on every side. Believe me, daughter, God will sanctify your beloved heart through the Cross, for He knows that your soul, which has so long been inured to pain and humiliations from creatures, will draw profit from all its sorrows. It is the will of the Creator by means of them to raise you to great heights in His holy eternity.”²

Towards the end of this terrible time, when Mother de

¹ “Vie et Œuvres,” Lettres Vol. V, p. 191.

² *Ibid.* p. 205.

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Bréchar d's own heart began to have misgivings and she consulted the Jesuit Father, it must have been no small added weight to her perplexity to have received the following letter from the venerable Foundress :

“ My poor dearest Daughter, how can I be but sick at heart knowing you to be in the midst of such terrible trouble ? I have spoken to his Lordship [Mgr. J. F. de Sales], who is exceedingly sorry that the affair should have ever gone so far, since you ought not to be treated with indignity. It is certainly preferable to forestall such intrigues and scandals. These gentlemen of the municipality are bound sooner or later to have remorse of conscience. May God in His goodness forgive them and give you the grace and the courage to withdraw from this disastrous affair with the sweetness and humility that our blessed Father would have practised on such an occasion. At times like this keep him always, I beg of you, before your mind. My poor dear Sister, I can well imagine the difficulties that beset you and the disappointment of having to give up so good an enterprise. But the abandonment of it will be the finest act in all your labours ; it will show that as long as you thought you were doing the will of God you held to it, and that now seeing it is not His good pleasure you have simply given it up. Do so, I beseech you, in the spirit in which our blessed Father would have done it¹ and in

¹ St. Francis says : “ God oftentimes inspires us with great and noble designs although it is not His will that we should accomplish them, in order to exercise us in the virtue of holy indifference. At such times, as we should with courage and constancy fearlessly begin and pursue the work with all our power, so must we tranquilly and in all sweetness acquiesce in whatever may be God's good pleasure as to the result of

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that of your vocation, for he never wished to constrain others, nor that we should enter into a town save by the goodwill of the people. Therefore, dearest Daughter, you should retire in a gentle spirit as I have already written to you. . . . What is this about undertaking a lawsuit or else claiming damages or interest? For the love of God let all that be and retire in peace without permitting one single word of resentment against those who have thwarted you to escape your lips, above all against the good Church dignitaries. . . . All our sisters will be delighted to see you again ; and I, above all, shall be extremely consoled at the happiness of having you near me. . . ."¹

This letter was written from Annecy on October 5 ; we do not know at what date it reached Mother de Bréchar, but in the following month we find the Saint writing to congratulate her daughter on the approaching termination of her trials ; and on December 8 Mother de Chantal came expressly to Riom to be present at the solemn installation of the sisters. The Bishop's representative celebrated Mass on the occasion and St. Chantal herself intoned the *Te Deum* in thanksgiving.

All the people, say the Annals, blessed God and acclaimed the new Foundation with the same loud voices which had been formerly raised against it. None were louder in extolling the virtue, the long-suffering and the

our enterprise. St. Louis by inspiration crossed the sea to conquer the Holy Land. He failed to conquer it and the tranquil submission with which he accepted his failure is to my mind more praiseworthy than the magnanimity of his enterprise."—"Traité de l'Amour de Dieu," Livre IX, chap. 6.)

¹ "Vie et Œuvres," Vol. V, p. 213.

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great capacity of Mother de Bréhard than those who had been in the days just passed her active opponents. Success acts as a wonderful tonic for praise.

The Blessed Mother of God, the *Consolatrix Afflictorum*, seems at no time to have been unmindful of her daughters. As at Mother Jeanne Charlotte's first Foundation, so now once more this tender Mother sent another of her faithful clients to serve and comfort her children. This was a certain holy priest who had made up his mind to join the Carthusian Order.¹ But before entering the monastery he desired to consult the Superior of the Oratorians at Riom. One night while there Our Lady appeared to him in his sleep and told him that she wished him to dedicate himself to the service of her religious daughters who said the *Confiteor* aloud at Mass. Upon awakening he recalled his dream, but only as a dream. However, he mentioned it to the Oratorian Superior, who also passed it off as a mere dream, remarking that he did not know of any Order which had this custom. Our sisters had at that time but just arrived in Riom and were obliged to go out to hear Mass. The nearest chapel was the Oratory, and here they went. Providence so arranged that the Mass at which they assisted was celebrated by this priest, and after the *Domine non sum dignus* one of the sisters recited aloud the *Confiteor* according to the Visitation custom. The celebrant was greatly surprised. He listened attentively and felt a conviction that these unknown religious could be none other than those Our Lady intended him to serve. After Mass he mentioned the circumstance to the Father Superior, who was much impressed by it. Together

¹ The name of this priest is not mentioned in the Annals.

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they called that day upon Mother de Bréhard. Upon hearing the dream she at once accepted the offer of the priest to undertake the duties of chaplain and confessor to the Community. For, as on a former occasion, she saw the loving hand of God in this special care of her house. Giving up all idea of becoming a Carthusian, this holy man served the Community henceforth with unparalleled devotion.

CHAPTER XXIV

TRUST IN HER LEADERSHIP

No sooner had the sisters begun their regular life than several new subjects presented themselves. Amongst them came the widow and the daughter of the Chief Provost of Auvergne, who, besides having true and good vocations, were able to help the Community financially. Little is recorded of these first years at Riom save that virtue and holiness reigned in the house under Mother Bréchar'd's government. Some two months after the Installation we find St. Chantal writing to her as follows : “. . . As you say you wish me always to tell you my thoughts I repeat you must not appear to be too sensitive of the defects of the sisters. Use no hard nor painful word when reproving them, but rather plead with them and affectionately encourage them to do better. When it is necessary to correct or to give penances let it be seen that it grieves you, and do it with loving charity as the Rule says, ‘That in blaming the fault she may comfort the offender.’ You will find that this is God’s way and that your daughters will profit by it. You and I love and understand one another so well that I know you will receive what I say in good part, prompted as it is by the sincere affection God has given me for you.”¹

There was, then, still some of the old leaven of severity at times about this fervent Mother. But while regarding

¹ “Vie et Œuvres,” Lettres Vol. V, p. 260.

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this aspect of her character we must not forget that the harsh treatment to which she was subjected in her childhood left an indelible mark upon her. We have all to face the battle of life either helped or hindered by our infant training. Like the virgin soil that within itself possesses so much fertility that it needs but the casting in of the seed to bring forth fruit in due time, so is it with our moral nature. The plastic mind of the child receives first impressions for good or ill from those around him, these impressions assimilate with the virgin soil of his mind and unfailingly influence his after career, nor can their roots ever be wholly eradicated. The experience of later years may materially modify or accentuate them, but the foundation they have laid remains. Only the Saints use grace so faithfully that it eventually supercedes nature, as we shall see before the close of this good Mother's life. It does not surprise us, then, to find that Mother de Bréhard was stricter in her government than most of the other Mothers who were trained at Annecy during the lifetime of the holy Founders. Yet not one of her daughters, as far as we can learn, but loved as well as revered her. When she did say hard things they understood them and it would seem as if they even liked her the better for them. They have left on record that "she was wise, just and judicious in her direction, impartial in her affections and wholly zealous for the good of souls." The Convent Confessor bears like witness: "Her mind," he says, "remained vigorous, judicious and at peace when it might have been overcome by her terrible physical sufferings. With strength from on high her heart refused to share the weakness of her body or to be mastered by earthly, passing tribulations." If her

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tendency was to be somewhat exacting in the perfection she required from her daughters she was far harder on herself. At no time does she seem to have repented in regard to what she demanded of her poor frail body. Well might she, like St. Francis of Assisi, have asked pardon of the *poor ass*, but this courtesy she appears never to have thought its due.

Notwithstanding some generous benefactors poverty had to be faced during all the years of Mother Jeanne Charlotte's Superiorship at Riom. But as far as was possible she made light of it. Yet it could not but have caused her many an hour of grave though hidden anxiety lest in its train might come solicitude detrimental to the spiritual welfare of her daughters. For she knew (what experienced Superior does not?) that too great poverty in a community becomes not a help but a hindrance to the observance of Rule, and this in turn brings its own inevitable relaxations. Therefore, under her guidance, the sisters strove to live above their daily privations by the continual practice of the joyous presence of God, seeing His will in every trouble, "keeping as close to Him as ever they could and thinking of nothing else but of how to love Him more and more."¹ She taught them that "pain had a function in life, that material comfort was the least of all small things, that reality lay in what was unseen, that silence and solitude led to an initiation of which the world knows nothing, that the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and that the violent, not the acquiescent, nor the contented, nor the sitters in arm-chairs, take it by force."²

¹ St. Francis de Sales.

² R. H. Benson, "The Conventionalist," p. 161.

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Confidence in our leader is in times of trouble a great prop of support, and this the sisters never failed to have in Mother Jeanne Charlotte during those long years of financial strain.

In the spring of 1624 Mother de Chantal sent two very pressing letters begging Mother de Bréhard, if her health at all permitted, to be present at the meeting of the First Mothers of the Institute, which was about to be convened in order to settle some points of observance and to publish the Book of Customs. Notwithstanding her infirmities she answered this appeal and went to Annecy. On her return journey she stopped at Moulins, by the wish of the holy Foundress, to advise and encourage Sister Marie Aimée de Morville. Needless to say her old children were overjoyed once more to see her.

During the succeeding years St. Chantal kept up an active correspondence with this brave daughter. These letters are full of affectionate inquiries and advice about the sad state of her health and the financial troubles that pressed so heavily upon the house of Riom. But chiefly are they of value for the useful instruction they contain on the duties of religious life and of Superiors.

Sister de Chariel was elected Superior at Riom in May 1630, as Mother Jeanne Charlotte's full term of office had expired. The Annals tell us that the deposed Superior handed over to the care of her successor a community fervent and faithful in observance, and, as far as the very limited resources of the house allowed, she had furnished every department in it.

The new Superior walked in her predecessor's footsteps, and Mother de Bréhard did all in her power to

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support and help her in her charge. Soon after the election there seems to have been a question of a Foundation at La Châtre by the Deposée¹ of Riom, but it fell through from want of sufficient means, greatly to the relief of St. Chantal, who disapproved of any but strong swarms being sent out from Visitation hives. To be well established in every sense of the word she considered essential for the after well-being of a Community. The plague broke out with great virulence in Riom during the autumn of 1631, and at the Bishop of Clermont's desire the Religious Orders left the town. Amongst them went the greater part of the Community of the Visitation to a neighbouring castle, where separate apartments were set aside for them by their hostess, the Marquise de Montmorin.² Sister de Bréchart, however, preferred to face the dangers of contagion rather than leave her beloved enclosure, and a few sisters remained with her. When the holy Foundress first heard of the sisters having left the town she wrote pathetically complaining that she had not been told of it and begging for a letter: "... For," she says, "believe me, daughter, there is no doubt but that true blood will always show itself, and as I have ever loved you and shall continue most dearly to love you as long as I live, how can I but yearn for dear news of you?"³ A little later, having received the "dear news," the Saint writes to congratulate her daughter on her courage and loyalty in remaining in her enclosure.

As in writing a genuine Life, delinquencies should be set down as well as virtues, we must not omit to mention

¹ Sister de Bréchart.

² See chap. xxxi.

³ "Vie et Œuvres," Lettres Vol. VI, p. 676.

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here that St. Chantal certainly seems to have a very just grievance against this daughter of hers for her procrastination in writing the "History of the Foundation of Annecy," which work had been committed to her pen. Over and over again the Saint inquires as to its progress and tries to egg her on to its accomplishment. Judging by the frequency of these appeals Mother de Bréhard was by no means as prompt to action in her literary undertakings as in her other activities.

CHAPTER XXV

THROUGH THE CRUCIBLE

THE reader will remember the heroic offering that Mother de Bigny made upon her election as Superior at Moulins to obtain the conversion of Sister Marie Aimée de Morville. God was now about to claim from her in a very unlooked-for way her share of the contract. We cannot better explain the terrible misunderstanding which brought about a veritable persecution of Mother de Bigny than by giving an extract from the Archives of the Visitation of Annecy and some of St. Chantal's letters on the subject. She wrote to Mother de Bréchar, who being again eligible was once more elected Superior at Riom in June 1633.

“ANNECY, *June 19, 1634.*

“MY DEAREST DAUGHTER,

“What a sad affair this is! But it is well brought home to the guilty one.¹ May God in His goodness give her the grace to enter into herself so that she may ask to be deposed from her charge. For my part I have no doubt whatever but that the Bishop of Autun ought to remove her, so that the other monasteries may know that such misdemeanors are not allowed to pass without exemplary punishment.²

¹ Mother Marie Angélique de Bigny.

² The Saint's strong action in regard to one of her daughters

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“These are my views ; and she should ask to be deposed in order that the affair may pass more amicably

necessitates exposure of the facts. Mother de Bigny, Superior at Moulins, fell dangerously ill of dropsy, and the doctor ordered her the waters of Bourbon as the only hope of cure. But a Rule of the Institute forbade the sisters to seek remedies outside their enclosure, and informing the physicians of this she refused to comply with their prescriptions. Rather than infringe the Rule she preferred, she said, to succumb to the illness. Her family, one of great influence at the French Court, upon hearing this, induced the Bishop of Autun to oblige her to take the waters. Not daring to oppose his will (the Visitation Communities being under direct obedience of their bishops) Mother de Bigny regretfully set out for the Baths, taking with her two elderly sisters of irreproachable virtue. During their sojourn out of their monastery, relates an eye-witness, “these three Religious gave nothing but edification to seculars. They never left their humble lodging save through necessity, and then nothing could exceed the simplicity and modesty of their demeanour.” On their return journey Mother de Bigny, believing it to be the wish of the Bishop, who was greatly desirous that she should be completely cured and had given permission, yielded very reluctantly to the entreaties of her brother, the Count d’Ainay, to visit his country house near Moulins. Here, as at Bourbon, her conduct was irreproachable, so that people used to say, “Everywhere the Daughters of Holy Mary distinguish themselves ; when in the midst of the world they are never seen to adopt its manners, and they inspire universal respect and reverence.” Notwithstanding this praise of the private life of Mother de Bigny, so grave an infraction of the laws of enclosure cannot be justified. But how far removed was this fault from the extravagant behaviour imputed to her, such as travelling as a princess, wearing white satin shoes and such like ! However these calumnies spread and were believed by people of repute and good sense, who wrote to the holy Foundress beseeching her to remedy the abuses which afflicted the Community of Moulins. God permitted that the Saint [and Mother de Bréchar] should give credence to these lying reports and take, in consequence, rigorous action against the accused. Still the tribulations that now accumulated upon the head of Mother de Bigny seem to have been less in punishment of her fault, of which she deeply repented, than a consequence of an act of generosity on her part. Expressing her opinion on this point, Mother Anne Marie [de Lage Puylaurens, Superior of the Visitation at Poitiers], who was present at her death, says : “Sister Marie Angélique [de

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in the outside world and with her family. It must also be made known for the edification and instruction of our monasteries that she has been removed from her charge of Superior in punishment for a breach of enclosure. This is the chief point. Now to come to the manner of doing it. I have written to the Bishop of Autun and to the Vicar-General, for without these two nothing can be done. I tell you this because if you have zeal for the glory of God and the good of the Institute, I consider it is your duty to go to Moulins. We, who are infirm are not always so ill that we cannot very well render some service to God and to our Order when His goodness puts an important affair like this in our way. If, however, you are incapable of so long a journey I think Father Charles will not refuse to give Sister (de Préchonet) the Superior of Montferrand leave to return

Bigny] told me in confidence that about a year before the persecution she felt inwardly urged to strive to attain to a great purity of heart and an entire detachment from created things. But knowing herself to be too weak to correspond with such a grace she had offered God a free hand over her to let Him give her suffering, humiliation—to use her as He pleased. Since her death we have found a paper on which she had written this absolute surrender of herself to God in these words: ‘First: May Thy providence alone, O my God, be my sole and perfect repose, though isolated and at enmity from all but Thee let me never count the cost. Second: May Jesus crucified be my perpetual model and the occupation of my spirit. May the Cross be my surety. Third: May illness, labour, contempt, misery, heart-writhings and extreme poverty come when it pleases Thee. Behold, my Lord, I am ready.’

“God accepted this offering, and Mother de Bigny passed through inexpressible sufferings and humiliations. When they came upon her she only saw in them the carrying out of the designs of Providence [and the fulfilment of the compact she had made with her God to obtain the conversion of St. Marie Aimé de Morville], so although she had most legitimate reasons to allege for going out of enclosure, as it was in answer to obedience, she never justified herself.”—Archives of the Visitation of Annecy.

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there, which will be necessary in case she (Mother de Bigny) may acknowledge that all the things that have been made known to you and that you have written to me are indeed true, and this being so she [the Superior of Montferrand] may make use of the letters I am writing to have the assistance of the Bishop of Autun so that a suitable remedy may be applied to the trouble of that house.

“Had I health and were I at liberty I would not trouble either of you to do this. But for you it is only a journey of a day and a half ; whereas it would take me seven or eight days. Should the Bishop of Autun be absent, you can write to him when forwarding my letters, and should you know of some father in religion, or some priest suitable for assisting you upon this occasion, ask for him, so that what you consider desirable for the good of the Monastery of Moulins may have the advantage of his authority. But be careful to have Sister the Superior [de Bigny] deposed as amicably as possible, both for the repose of minds and the satisfaction of relatives. After this she should be transferred to some other monastery. Autun would probably be the most convenient.”¹

The Saint then suggests Sister de Chastellux, who had formerly been Superior at Moulins and was now governing Bourg, to take Mother de Bigny's place. But she bids Mother de Bréhard make no unnecessary delay and act with holy liberty, putting aside all private feelings such as that of wishing it not to be known

¹ Here see “La Vie de Madame de Montmorency, Tirée des MSS. conservés dans la Monastère de la Visitation de Moulins,” MDCCLXIX., Vol. I, p. 264.

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that she is mixed up in the affair because she has formerly been the recipient of so much kindness from the accused. She must act for no other interest or consideration than the glory of God and the good of the Institute, and let charity be her only motive.

At the end of this letter the Saint adds a postscript which is difficult to understand. After saying, "Make quite sure that all you have written to me is true before you send my letters to the other Superiors," she, presumably, thinking that there might be some difficulty in the deposition on the real grounds because the Bishop had himself given the order for Mother de Bigny to go to the waters, tells Mother Jeanne Charlotte, if the accused is guilty of any other serious failings of observance on which she could be deposed, to let the Ecclesiastical Superiors know of them, so that, if necessary, these grounds might furnish reason for removing her.¹

St. Chantal felt most strongly that this deposition ought to take place as an example for ever on the point of enclosure to the other monasteries, hence her severe action in regard to the misrepresented Superior. Relaxed monasteries, such as that of the Benedictines of Puits d'Orbe mentioned in a preceding chapter, were, unhappily, very common at this time, and Mother de Chantal had been commissioned to reform many of them, so that she could not possibly overlook or condone the statement which had got abroad that one of her own daughters had failed in enclosure, the very point of observance the neglect of which was causing such incalculable harm to religion. Though the needs of

¹ "Vie et Œuvres," Lettres Vol. VII, p. 362.

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the Church were soon to create a new class of religious women, whose constitutions were framed to embrace a life-work outside the cloister,¹ they were not to supersede the existing Orders, whose chief work was intercession. Both were needed. When Moses ceased to plead upon the mountain the battle wavered in the plain. Therefore did St. Chantal's labours to bring back the erring houses to their primitive fervour and observance necessitate her action in this case. She also wrote to the delinquent, and it is certainly one of the severest letters she ever penned.

"My daughter," she writes, "in the first place I protest to you that not one of your sisters has written to me, and I know nothing from them of the things that have passed, but other houses have indeed written." She then proceeds to enumerate the accusations brought against Mother de Bigny: "that you had two carriages for travelling, in one of which, you, a sister, a minim father, your brother and a physician travelled; and in the other three of your religious sisters with an out-sister and certain secular gentlemen; and that you kept open house at Bourbon. If this is so, my dear daughter, you ought to tell me the truth. As to what I hear about your being commanded to go to the waters under pain of mortal sin, this command was an exceptional one, and did not originate with your ecclesiastical Superior, to whom, had you made your remonstrance with the humility and respect that is his due, he would not, I am sure, have renewed the command under pain of sin. This is probably what N. N. means by saying that you despised the *Bienheureux*² and me because you have not

¹ The Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul.

² St. Francis de Sales.

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carried out his intention nor mine, as I have expressed it in the 'Answers.'¹ In short, if all that I hear is true of the excursions you have made since you have been to Bourbon, and other things that have been pointed out to me, certainly, my daughter, this behaviour is altogether foreign to the spirit of our Institute. But I will wait to hear the truth about it." The Saint then speaks of the matter having been, she is told, discussed both within and without the Convent, of which she highly disapproves ; though she quite approves of remonstrances being made in the right quarter and this in the cause of truth. She continues : "For the rest, I cannot refrain from telling you, with my usual frankness, that I marvel at you ; for while professing such special confidence in me you act in matters of such importance to the Institute without consulting me. For instance, your journey to Brittany, your visit to the waters, this Foundation for which you have already received two subjects, and of which I knew nothing until the thing had been done. It is not that I wish to subject you to communicate these matters to me, but to let you see that I am not so easily imposed upon, for I know very well that you ask my advice about trifles so as to keep on good terms with me, but in important things, about which I could really be a help to you, you act as seems good to you and then tell me." The Saint concludes by asking pardon for her frank way of speaking, but it will always be her way, she says, of treating with her daughters. "It is not that I wish to play the Mother over you," she continues,

¹ The title of a book containing Answers given by St. Chantal to questions on observance put to her by her daughters.

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“but because I feel obliged to speak. . . . I pray God with all my heart to give you His Holy Spirit, that you may do all things according to His good pleasure and the spirit of your vocation and not from human prudence nor natural inclinations. May His sweet Goodness fill you with His holy and pure love and make you and all our sisters entirely His own.

“I remain in Him, etc.”¹

The account of this painful event given in the Annals of Moulins is almost identical with that already quoted from the Annecy Archives. The Annals add, however, the following account of the deposition :

“The Bishop of Autun, upon being asked by St. Chantal to depose Mother de Bigny, at once sent his Vicar-General to Moulins, accompanied by the Mother Superior of the Visitation of Autun and three sisters destined to exercise the principal charges. They arrived at five o'clock in the evening of October 4. The Vicar-General straightway entered the enclosure and assembled the chapter. He then informed the Community that he had been deputed to receive the deposition of Mother de Bigny, and to hand over her charge, until new arrangements were made, to the Mother who accompanied him. The virtuous Mother de Bigny at once came forward to accept her deposition without asking the cause of this extraordinary proceeding. But the sisters, who honoured her according to her merits, asked with tears that the deposition should be deferred until the arrival of Mother de Bréhard, who was expected immediately. To this the Vicar-General appeared

¹ “Vie et Œuvres,” Lettres Vol. VII (Lettre 1321), p. 363.

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to agree, but the next morning he came to say the Community Mass, before which he had an interview with Mother de Bigny. At the end of Mass, having ordered the choir grille to be opened, he received in public the Superior's deposition, without observing the customary rule of closing the church doors, or asking the congregation to withdraw. The surprise and affliction of the sisters was unbounded. They left the choir weeping and sobbing, and taking God to witness to the injustice done to their Mother. But this good Mother who had accustomed herself to see only the hand of God in all that happened to her, submitted so absolutely that she expressed no wish to justify herself, nor did she utter one single word of complaint, but strove with all her power to stop the lamentations of the sisters.¹

¹ Unpublished History of the Foundation of Moulins.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DUCHESS DE MONTMORENCY

THE Princess Marie-Félice des Ursins, Duchess de Montmorency,¹ was imprisoned in the Castle of Moulins by order of her cousin Louis XIII after her husband's execution.² At this time Mother de Chantal was at Lyons, and the Duchess, greatly desiring to make her personal acquaintance, had asked for an interview with her when passing through that town on her way to prison. But Richelieu, through his brother the Archbishop of Lyons, denied her this consolation. St. Chantal keenly felt the prohibition and sent directions to Mother de Bigny to pay every attention in her power to the illustrious captive during her imprisonment at Moulins.

¹ The House of Montmorency Henry IV declared to be the first in Europe after that of the Bourbons. It had furnished six Constables and twelve Marshals of France.

² Henry II, Duke de Montmorency, believed that he could render a service to the King and to France by opposing Richelieu's increasing power ; and having received into his province of Languedoc, of which he was governor, Gaston, Duke of Orleans, heir-presumptive to the crown, he undertook to grapple with the omnipotent Minister. He failed in his attempt. Taken prisoner in the battle of Castelnaudary, after having received eighteen wounds, he was carried to the Parliament of Toulouse and condemned to death in spite of the tears of the witnesses, of the soldiers, and even of the judges themselves. He walked to the scaffold with a courage that drew cries of admiration from the beholders. The soldiers that assisted at his execution drank his blood, and dipped into it their swords, that by virtue of it the courage of the heart from whence it had flowed might be imparted to them." —(Bougaud, "St. Chantal," Vol. II, p. 375.)

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Faithfully carrying out these instructions an outsister was sent two or three times every week to the Duchess with fresh fruit and such other little attentions as might help to alleviate her captivity. In course of time its severity was relaxed and Madame de Montmorency at once made use of her partial freedom to further her acquaintance with the Visitation sisters in the town. Later, when released from prison, she took up her abode in the Convent. Two months after her arrival the physician ordered her to take the waters of Bourbon. So in God's design was she to be an eye-witness and later to give valuable testimony to the manner in which Mother de Bigny conducted herself. The following year, when the cruel suspicions against this much-maligned Mother were at their height, her daughters wrote to Madame de Montmorency, who was again at Bourbon, hoping that by her influence she might set matters right. Her answer is as follows: "I could not read your letter without shedding tears as it told me that what I so much dreaded had happened. If I thought my presence could have arrested it I should have been with you before now. But N. considered himself charged with a commission which, regardless of entreaties, he felt bound to carry out in all its rigour. It was solely the knowledge of this I most solemnly assure you that prevented me from bringing to bear on him every influence at my command. May God guide you so to act under this affliction that no new sorrow may be added to it. Believe me, I am not ungrateful, rather do I look upon it as a personal calamity that I am powerless in the matter. For indeed, my poor unhappy sisters, I truly desire to serve you.—Yours, DES URSINS."

The Duchess de Montmorency

A few days after Mother de Bigny's deposition the sisters were ordered to proceed to a new election. They implored to be allowed to await the arrival of Mother de Bréhard, but this was refused. They then asked and obtained permission to speak to the Rector of the Jesuits, Père Liggende. Having heard all they had to say he made a short discourse in which he pointed out to them that this storm would pass, but until it did, however unjust and severe the treatment to which they were subjected, they would have to submit. The election was then proceeded with and Mother de Chastellux was elected. The following day the Vicar-General and the religious who had accompanied him were to return, taking with them the deposed Superior. But upon hearing that Mother de Bréhard was expected that very day they deferred their departure. Madame de Montmorency also arrived upon the same day. Both she and Mother Jeanne Charlotte gave themselves wholeheartedly to the sorely tried Mother and sisters in the manner in which those who have themselves tasted deeply of the Cross have the power to impart strength and sympathy.

It seemed as if it but needed the calming presence of Mother de Bréhard to bring back peace to these perplexed and afflicted hearts. "The sisters want to say to you, Mother," said Madame de Montmorency to her one day, "what Martha and Mary said to Our Lord: "If you had been here these things would not have come to pass. I feel that you are going to turn their sorrow into joy, for already your presence is giving them consolation, but do not forget to reserve a moment of leisure for my comfort."

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To this request the Mother willingly acceded, and her doing so has procured for us a valuable judgment of her own merits. Madame de Montmorency, herself a woman of remarkable endowments, held Mother de Bréhard in the highest esteem. The fervour and resignation of the community the Duchess considered to be, under God, the outcome of the unusual talents of her who knew how to sublimate everything, to transmute pusillanimity into courage, and from the feeble of soul to produce alacrity in the service of God. Envious of such spiritual advancement this holy woman asked to be allowed to attend the conferences which, during this visit, Mother Jeanne Charlotte gave the Community. Her request granted, she tells us that she had never heard words so touching and persuasive, that the instructions, on humility and on that peace of heart which the religious should preserve no matter what the persecutions, troubles, or agitating events she might have to endure, were full of unction and solidity. It was, however, thought desirable to stop her attendance at these discourses lest, being intended for religious, they might be unsuitable for her. "Leave me alone," she said upon hearing this; "I protest to you I have never taken half the pleasure in the conversations, however delightful, I have heard in society, that I now take in listening to these conferences."

If the good Mother's words were fruitful in the souls of the sisters they were not less so in that of Madame de Montmorency. Straightway upon the very first instruction she heard, she burnt all the letters she had received from the Duke, with the exception of the last two, which had been written from his prison. Considering her intense love for her husband this act must have been to

The Duchess de Montmorency

her a very keen sacrifice. In her private conversations with Mother de Bréhard she made known to her all her spiritual aspirations and difficulties, and sought her guidance in everything.¹

Mother Jeanne Charlotte left Moulins having pacified all, given the Duchess the full time she wished, and exhorted the sisters to give their confidence to this holy princess. But Madame de Montmorency's own incomparable sweetness soon opened all hearts to her. She let no opportunity pass of expressing how deeply she valued the advice she received from Mother de Bréhard. "I look upon her," she said, "as the greatest mind I have ever known in her sex, yet what I admire above all else is her humility ; she has attained to the perfection of this virtue so that one would think it was nature and not grace in her. What it must have cost her at every step to have acquired it to such a degree !"

In those days, as we have already seen, the public took a kind of family interest in all the concerns of the Communities of their respective towns, not always to the good pleasure of the sisters ; and now, after the election of Mother de Chastellux, there was no end to the gossip of the town. No secret had been made as to the reason of the deposition of Mother de Bigny. But either because the laxity of so many religious houses appeared nothing very startling or from some innate desire of the popular mind to affect knowledge of other people's concerns, or what not, they invented many calumnies about the poor nuns. These were repeated to Madame

¹ "La Vie de Madame de Montmorency, Supérieure de la Visitation de Ste. Marie de Moulins ; tirée des Manuscrits conservés dans ce Monastère." A. Clermont-Ferrand : 1769, Tome I, p. 279 sq.

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de Montmorency, who, it was reported, had gone to live elsewhere because she was so disgusted with the sisters. To put a stop to such evil reports she returned and took up her permanent residence in the monastery, openly taking the part of the nuns. One day soon after her return the preacher, from the pulpit of their own Convent chapel, condemned in very forcible language the disorders presumedly reigning in the monastery. Madame de Montmorency, who was present, immediately rose with manifest indignation, and giving a sign to her suite left her place at the top of the aisle followed by her numerous attendants, and quitting the chapel in the presence of a crowded congregation she re-entered the monastery. This public protestation had the desired effect. The eyes of the inhabitants of Moulins were opened to the truth and the Visitation regained their confidence and esteem. The illustrious Duchess had acquired a happy ascendancy over them on account of her wisdom and virtue.¹

¹ On August 10, 1634, Madame de Montmorency left her prison (the Castle of Moulins) to retire to the Visitation Monastery. A sufficiently spacious building adjoining the Convent was fitted up for her attendants. Her custom was to enter the Convent enclosure at five o'clock each evening and to leave it before noon next day. In her earlier days in Languedoc it was said that no private individual anywhere possessed so large a retinue as the Duke de Montmorency. Not less than eighty pages and fifty gentlemen-in-waiting, each attired in the sumptuous apparel due, in those times, to his rank, and a proportionate staff of domestics formed this princely household. In acknowledgment of his wife's talents and virtue the Duke made her *Gouvernante* of the Province, over which she ruled during his frequent absences from home in those turbulent days of constant warfare. Her ability was such in the management of his household and vast estates and the dispensing of his revenues that it was quickly recognised by the nobles of Languedoc. From henceforth their confidence in her penetration, justice, and impartiality caused these gentlemen to seek her

The Duchess de Montmorency

Some years later St. Chantal visited the sisters. All spoke freely to her, for they were still sore at the severity with which their Mother had been treated and full of compassion for her. The Saint openly avowed her regret that things had been conducted in the manner related to her : this soothed the sisters, while the wonderful virtue of the dear deposed Mother and her daughters' loyalty to her from whom they were now separated, edified and comforted the venerable Foundress beyond expression.¹

On February 2, 1640, God released Mother de Bigny from her earthly pilgrimage. Tried at the bar from whence there is no appeal, her Divine Lover, who never fails His own, pronounced judgment : no stain must henceforth remain on the memory of her who had been so cruelly misunderstood. In His own divinely love-inspired, conclusive way He announced the verdict by the exhalation from her remains of an exquisite odour ; its fragrance impregnated the monastery and filled with sweetness the hearts of the sisters with whom she had been living. They who had learnt to love her, now reverently and gladly hailed this clear indication of the favourable judgment of the Omnipotent.

Mother Marie Angélique de Bigny died, aged 36, at the Monastery of Poitiers, where during two years and some

advice and to appeal to her in their differences, and they abode by her decision.—(“ Vie de Madame de Montmorency,” Tome I, pp. 84 *sqq.*)

About 1656 she entered the Visitation novitiate at Moulins. On her profession she discharged all her attendants and relinquished all her property. She died Superior of the monastery, beloved and revered by all, on June 5, 1666, being in her 66th year. She had asked God not to take her to Himself until she had seen the canonisation of the holy Founder, St. Francis de Sales. This took place on April 19, 1665.—(“ Vie,” Tome II, p. 293.)

¹ Unpublished History of the Foundation of Moulins.

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months she suffered an internal agony of pain which she offered to God in reparation for sin and to honour the sacred agony in the Garden of Olives. After her death it was found that she had engraved over her heart in large letters the Holy Name of Jesus.¹

“Suffering passes away, having suffered never passes away.”²

¹ Archives of the Visitation of Poitiers.

² St. Teresa.

CHAPTER XXVII

HER DAUGHTERS PRAISE HER

SAINT CHANTAL, in one of her letters to Mother de Bréhard when urging her to undertake the mission to Moulins, writes: "You are their good first Mother, it will give them new life to see you, and if you but act freely, which I beg of you to do, you are better able to help them than I." "Their good first Mother," then, as we have seen, went to them with her engaging personality, her silent, earnest way, and marvellous were the effects of her visit on the Community. These daughters had seen her grow in grace during the first years of her Motherhood, and now they saw the fruits of her long life-struggle with her own faulty nature. The good work which St. Francis had begun by many a skilful stroke, she had, by her fidelity to grace and her humble efforts at self-conquest, wrought almost to perfection. *Out of the strong cometh forth sweetness.*¹ The gentleness that has firmness for its basis, that is the outcome of the curbing of a strong will, wins more souls to God than when it is only Nature's sweet gift. Mother Jeanne Charlotte told her sisters that it was the hand of loving fellowship she wished to hold out to them, and that arguments and remedies which might be applied to creatures who lacked good judgment and reasonableness

¹ Judges xv, 14.

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were not for such as they, that that which was not for the interest of the whole Institute could not be for the true interest of any member of it. Thus did they see their great cross in a new light, and her arguments took such a hold of them, they tell us, that they themselves marvelled at the change wrought in them. To each sister she gave her full attention, and looked through the mind of the speaker as well as through her own—a secret of good government.

If God in His loving kindness vouchsafes us a listener to whom we can reveal in our own tongue-tied fashion an imperfect image of the soul within, and that listener takes up the tale, and with sympathy crosses our t's and dots our i's almost without our knowing it, what comfort is it not to the poor stricken soul. Such a listener was this good Mother. No severity, they make a point of telling us, could be observed in her dealings with them. Yet in the course of the venerable Foundress's correspondence we find her not so many years back, warning her daughter always to watch this tendency in herself, and to keep her speech well under the law of gentleness. For, truth to say, Mother de Bréchar d's quick and sure discernment made it difficult for her in her less perfect days not sometimes to fail in the Christ-like meekness upon which St. Francis modelled his own speech. But when she received such candid and sound advice from the saintly Mother she looked her shortcomings straight in the face, and never failed to profit by the correction, for she had that inflexible sincerity that loves the truth, however painful, before all else. Just once or twice her daughters record an exception at this time to her self-imposed law of gentleness. A sister spoke flattering

Her Daughters Praise Her

words to her, and checking the offender with some severity she said : " No more of this, if you please, my sister ; I have no desire to be the idol of either your admiration or your flattery." We may also include under this severe treatment her manner of acting when shown, likewise during this visit to Moulins, two portraits of herself, which against her will, the Foundress of Moulins had had previously executed, and which the sisters faithfully treasured. She destroyed both. It seems to us as if St. Francis would have allowed his children the pleasure of retaining any remembrance of himself, and in doing so would have more nearly resembled his Master. But humility, like pride, hath many a handle, *and star differeth from star in glory.*¹ More skilful they tell us than the alchemist that transmutes the baser metal into gold, she made suffering lovable, and contempt desirable.

As she grew old her character became singularly unselfish, and at times in her life this characteristic was severely tested ; upon one occasion, in 1619, Mother de Chantal wrote to her asking her to send three of her Community, whose names she mentioned, to another house in need of hands and heads. These three sisters were her chief support, for they held the principal offices in the Convent, and hardly any house at that moment could have been in greater need than Moulins. The Saint's letter arrived at four o'clock in the afternoon, at dawn next morning the three sisters were on the road, and this although Mother de Bréhard knew that had Mother de Chantal been aware of her plight she would not have permitted them to leave her. As they set out she remarked to a sister,

¹ 1 Corinthians xv. 41.

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“Had our Mother sent for one of my eyes or one of my arms I should have willingly given it, in testimony of my humble obedience.” But not even in such matters did she now seek to be foremost, and in proportion as she shrank from the painful mission to Moulins does success appear to have attended it. Another mark of her gift of government was the manner in which she threw the responsibility of their offices upon the sisters, never seeking to control them in their charges. She used to say that the mild and loving spirit of Christianity lets each one, in unessential matters, abound in her own sense, provided she faithfully adhere to her conscience and her Rule.

The respect with which she treated the members of her Community evoked a protest one day from a young Religious who had been made Mistress of Novices; whereupon the good Mother replied that she could not fail to give her the respect due to the office she held.

We hear from both the Moulins and Rion Communities that with the sick she was a true mother, and from the latter, that in times of illness, notwithstanding their great poverty, they never wanted for anything, so that from the manner in which they were treated one would have thought plenty abounded in the house. “God sent the illness,” she would say, “and He knows very well that the sick must be taken care of, and provided we do our duty He will not fail to do His part.” But for herself she had no tenderness. She took the remedies at hand, and often they were humiliating ones, with simple and humble obedience. Upon one occasion the Moulins sisters, ever anxious, as far as possible, to alleviate her physical sufferings, took advantage of the

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arrival of two eminent physicians in their town to consult them on her case. The Convent doctor at Riom having diagnosed it for these gentlemen they expressed themselves after consultation as hopeful of a cure, but said that before prescribing they must see the patient. The Superior at once wrote to Mother de Bréhard asking her to come to Moulins, and pointing out that besides the matter of her illness her presence would be useful in the Convent at the time. We cannot imagine her sending any other answer than that which came: "Health or sickness are," she wrote, "indifferent to me, and it little matters whether my life be long or short, but what does matter very much is that I should not give bad example to the congregation, and for this reason I cannot go to you." So she continued gently and humbly to bear her infirmities, and when these increased and she was in consequence often obliged to be absent from the Holy Office, it was a keen privation to her. All the more because throughout her religious life she had striven, notwithstanding ill-health, to be in constant attendance at this great public prayer of the Church. Had we seen her coming from it or from other prayer we could better understand what this privation must have cost her. At such times her countenance was, we are told, often so beautiful that it appeared luminous, and when, as frequently happened, a sister needed speech with her on coming out of choir, such a one had to wait a little till the passing moments brought her Mother back to sublunary things and enabled her to regain control of her emotions. Then she would without remark attend simply to the needs of the sister. Her attitude at prayer, at which she knelt all the time, was so reverential

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and so humble as to be a silent sermon to those who were privileged to witness it. For the immediate service of Our Lord she demanded the utmost care and reverence, and it was the experience of both houses that she never overlooked any fault at the Holy Office, nor any forgetfulness or omission on the part of the sacristan. Mutual respect amongst her daughters was another object of her peculiar care. "Woe to that Community," she would say, "where the Superior does not inculcate mutual esteem amongst the sisters; for those who lack this are no longer disciples of Our Lord, but of their own passions and inclinations, and they will in the end reap what they have sown."

CHAPTER XXVIII

FAREWELL LETTERS TO ST. CHANTAL

Soon after her return to Riom Mother de Bréhard felt that her growing infirmities made the burden of government beyond her strength. Upon representing this to Mother de Chantal two sisters were at once sent from Annecy to help her, for the Saint by no means wished to lose the ministrations of this invaluable Superior. One of those sent was Sister Françoise Angélique de la Croix de Fesigny, who, the reader will remember, had been the Benjamin of the sister foundresses at Moulins. She gives us the following account of Mother Jeanne Charlotte, whom she had all her life revered and loved. "I was so confused," she says, "when upon every occasion this venerable Mother would refer to me that I did not know what to do with myself. She told me that she had only one place in which to lodge a daughter of Annecy, and that was in her heart. Her conversation was simple and concise ; she was a woman of few words except when fired with zeal for the observance, and then even for slight faults I have seen her shed tears. But there was no pusillanimity about her, and her inability to attend the exercises of religious life was one of her greatest trials." Sometimes, Sister Françoise Angélique tells us, she did herself such violence to be present at them that it was painfully

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manifest to the sisters that the effort was altogether beyond her strength. "Throughout the country," she continues, "she was held in great esteem, and looked upon as a person of rare intelligence—a chosen soul—singularly endowed by nature and by grace. Her daughters loved her, and when they could no longer have her as Superior, and they had elected another in her place, her humility, respect, and submission to the new Mother was a continual source of edification to them. In short, her holy habit of living in the presence of God and referring everything to Him made her turn the poverty of her house, the infirmities of her body, the humiliations and adversities she underwent, exclusively to the profit of her soul. By all these things she gained and by nothing did she suffer herself to lose."

At the end of her third triennial she was still eligible for the office of Superior, as after her first six years another Superior intervened and the Community had no other thought than to re-elect her. But she pleaded so earnestly and humbly that her humility prevailed, and the sisters consented to deprive themselves of her good government, and leave her, as she asked, with no other burden than her sufferings. Upon gaining her desire she writes to St. Chantal: "I can now say in good earnest that I seem to have nothing in this world to do but to suffer and to prepare to leave it. Our [new] Mother is doing splendidly. It would be a thousand pities had I any longer hindered the advance of the sisters in perfection by my bad guidance. Believe me, dearest Mother, I have not a shadow of a doubt on this point. Now about my own inward trials. Never have

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I had more reason to be dissatisfied with myself, for I appear to be getting more and more imperfect and worthless in the sight of God. When at prayer I am generally rebuked for my negligences and infidelities and my cowardliness in the practice of His holy love; so there is nothing for me to do but to remain humbled and convicted before this sovereign Judge and Lord. Sometimes, but rarely, I say, 'O Lord, I have sinned and I am nothing!' Beyond this, I cannot at times utter one single word, while again at other times, when the knowledge of my sin and my nothingness comes upon me, I adore in my poor way the immutability, the purity, the holiness of my God, my All. And though my heart is crushed, seeing myself convicted by His divine Justice, a justice which finds flaws we cannot see and darkness where we think there is light, yet I am not without hope, for He has given me a holy confidence that if you, dear Mother, pray for me He will not condemn eternally your poor worthless Jeanne Charlotte."

This letter was soon followed by another, and now it was Sister de Bréchart's turn to yield to her daughters' wishes, as they had so lately done to hers. She desired to return to Annecy before her death, but the Community, discovering her project, at once wrote to St. Chantal entreating her not to deprive them of one whose presence was so useful and consoling to them. For though now frequently confined to her bed, her mental faculties remained unimpaired; of her it could be most truly said, that :

"With every anguish of her earthly part
The spirit's sight grows clearer."¹

¹ T. R. Lovall.

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Shortly after this we find the sisters writing to Annecy to thank the Saint for acceding to their request. Mother de Bréchart's own letter to St. Chantal upon this occasion was fortunately preserved. She says :

“My dearest Mother, I have always been longing for an opportunity of proving to you my humble obedience ; now it has come. And so I look upon your disposing of my poor person quite independently of my wishes as a special favour from God. Your will will ever be a law to me, and the manifestation of the Divine Will. My mind is at peace, although I yearned to return to that blessed Monastery of Annecy. As to whether or no it was the good pleasure of God that I should do so I have long been doubtful, so for the last six or seven months the chief virtue I have tried to practise has been to abandon myself without any reserve into the hands of His holy Providence. For all my life He has taken a fatherly care of me, and it would be wicked of me to distrust Him now. It is settled then, beloved Mother, that I shall never again have the honour and consolation of seeing you this side of Paradise, but there I hope to meet you through the merits of the adorable Blood of my Saviour, and by the help of your prayers. I have now but three duties left to fulfil, and of these I feel very incapable. The first is to thank your Charity a thousand times for the great goodness and kindness you have been pleased to show to one so utterly unworthy. The second, to ask the Divine Majesty to be for ever Himself your reward. The third, to prepare for death. But this I know not in truth how to do. I have never felt so full of self-love

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as now, nor more powerless to carry out the great designs of God over me, nor to fulfil the longings for perfection with which He inspires me. I do not think I can live long. Five or six years of sorrow and mental suffering have almost killed me, and my bodily illness wearies me in the most unaccountable manner.

"I cannot conclude, beloved Mother, without this one word more. When I consider how unworthy I am of being your daughter, and how little satisfaction I have given you, I simply cry at the thought. I ask you a thousand pardons. The punishment of never seeing you again very fittingly crowns my life, for it has been nothing but sin and infidelity to God. Humbly adoring His Divine Justice, and submitting myself to it here on earth, I ask you, O my true Mother, to beg of Him, in His infinite mercy, to be propitious to me in heaven."

Some months later Mother Péronne Marie de Châtel begs of her old friend to tell her some of the secrets of her soul, for her edification, and she replies: "You command me to give you consolation by telling you about my own inward life, but I am unable to tell you anything save that God shows me a way of mercy and I, rebellious wretch that I am, with faithless steps walk in it continually."

This extract sums up the little she has to say in this letter on the subject of her soul's well-being. It was written in August, 1637, and in October God released Mother Jeanne Charlotte from a life of almost uninterrupted suffering.

CHAPTER XXIX

DEATH

HER contemporary biographer, speaking of Mother de Brécharde, says :

“The world was not her element, and she never tasted of its joys. To her it was a stormy sea, the perils of which she braved, and the rocks and pirates of which she skilfully avoided. And when the hour of death came she quitted the vessel of her body and the sea of this world not only without regret, but with positive delight.”¹

In the September of 1637 she fell ill of a quartan fever, and dropsy was apprehended. But at the beginning of October the fever changed its character, and restoration to her normal state of health was anticipated. Calmly she viewed the prospect of a prolongation of her life, but joyfully the hope of its speedy termination. With absolute unconcern as to her personal needs, her Superior tells us, had she been left without nourishment or assistance she would not have noticed it, for the happy contemplation of God, in which she was absorbed, made her oblivious to all else. Alternate hope and fear held the Community for some weeks before her death in a state of constant tension. But as the end drew near, and each day revealed to the happy patient less hope of life, she kept constantly saying : “What, I ! wretched I ! am

¹ Chaugy, “*Les Vies de Quatre des Premières Mères*,” p. 215.

Death

going to see my God ” ; then she would lose herself for a little space in the thought of this happiness and again, as it were coming back to earth, would make fervent acts of contrition, hope, faith, and burning love. After one of these spells of absorption she said to the sisters round her bed : “ I’ll tell you how it is with me : after I have asked pardon of God for all my sins, and confessed that they are innumerable, and that hell is too good for me, then comes the firm hope that His Goodness will show me mercy, and the thought of my death brings no other feeling than one of intense joy at the prospect of seeing my God ” ; and again : “ Oh, the happiness, the delight of this thought.”

Small wonder Jeanne Charlotte de Bréhard should be love-sick and home-sick for heaven ; for she was fully conscious that while here on earth she could never compete with the praise her Beloved received in His celestial home, nor content the inarticulate longings of her heart to render Him homage. So with secret but unutterable desire she pined to be delivered from the bonds of life, to pass to that temple of love which she knew to be resonant with the plaudits of her Spouse. “ Where voices,” St. Francis had taught her, “ loud as thunder, tumultuous as the waves of the mighty ocean, yet soft and sweet as the melody of a harp with a sensitive touch upon its strings, would yield delicious entertainment ; where souls thrill with exquisite delight in glorifying the divine perfections ” ¹ of Him whom she had loved from her youth. And as she grew in years and in self-knowledge the holy flame did not abate. Time but purified her love. The

¹ “ Œuvres,” Tome IV ; “ Traité de l’Amour de Dieu,” Vol. I, Livre V, chap. 10.

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passing of every cycle marked the riddance of some earthly taint, and some excrescence on the purity of her love dropped from her. Till now, the sheer glory of the death-bed of such a lover so wrought upon the emotions of her sisters that, partaking of her happiness, they wept, not for sorrow but for joy, and for the moment lost sight completely of the dreaded separation. At the very end she appeared to fall into a kind of lethargy, and they tell us that, looking upon her happy and serene countenance, they loved to think that while her senses were suspended the functions of her soul were free and her spirit awake and absorbed in God.

On November 17 she received Extreme Unction, and next day while the Community were reciting the prayers for the departing soul she peacefully expired. She was fifty-seven years of age.

Mother de Bréchart's life was one of true triumph ; impelled by love, she had ever done what she considered her duty regardless of consequences. Weak and frail of body, in almost perpetual physical suffering, in the face of desperate obstacles and severe criticism, she achieved all that, as far as it is given to us to judge, had in the designs of God been committed to her. And she put her energy, her highest thought, and her calmest judgment into all she undertook. She never relaxed the severe self-restraint that made her the noble character she became. But now at the end, when Mother Chahu told her the final sentence, flinging aside her usual reserve she threw her arms lovingly round the Mother's neck and thanked her with an unfaltering voice for the consolation the message brought her.

Death

“Happy radiant spirit that could thus
Transmute to gold the leaden ore of sorrow,
Distil from bitter herbs a draught of joy,
And like a garland wear a crown of thorns.”

To the account of the virtues of Mother de Bréchar, given in a previous chapter, Madame de Montmorency added these lines :

“I am glad our dear sisters have shown me this little summary of their very dear Mother de Bréchar, as it enables me to add my testimony to theirs. To my mind she possessed all the virtues of which they speak in a far more eminent degree than it is possible to express. Just in the same way as in a virtuous soul the goodness that is manifest to us is incomparably less than the goodness that is hidden from us.—DES URSINS.”

“These few words,” said Saint Chantal, “testifying the opinion of this wise and judicious princess are so admirable that it would be superfluous to add a word to them in order to make known the virtue of this most dear Mother.

“From our First Monastery of the Visitation of
Holy Mary of Annecy. 1638.”

But the Venerable Foundress’s own opinion, written in the “Book of Vows” of the First Monastery of Annecy, is still more valuable. She writes :

“On the 18th of November, 1637, our very honoured Sister Jeanne Charlotte de Bréchar died in Our Lord after having received all the last Sacraments. Full of joy and with a contrite heart she went to her God. She was

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a Burgundian lady, well favoured according to this world, but of too good a heart to be satisfied with it. Hence corresponding to the many lights and attractions bestowed upon her by the Divine liberality, and acting on the advice of our blessed Father, she joined us with our dear Sister Jacqueline Favre, and we three commenced together our dear Congregation and Institute. This dear sister possessed a very capable mind which made her exceptionally useful in arranging all the offices [of the Convent]. She took immense trouble and care in this work. Later on she was appointed Mistress of Novices, and with the happiest results, as likewise that of Assistant during our absence from this monastery. In the year 1616 she was sent as Superior on the Foundation of our Monastery of Moulins, the third of the Institute, which she governed for six years, and then founded and governed that of Riom, where she ended her days.

“God led this soul by the way of great bodily suffering and many temporal afflictions. All of these she humbly received from the hand of Our Lord, for she was devoted and ardent, full of zeal for the salvation and perfection of souls, loving intensely her vocation, and all the observances of it. To a rarely gifted mind, with which Our Lord had blessed her, she united by His Divine grace a humble heart, and presumed on nothing of herself, but in all things awaited the action of God. She was getting towards sixty years of age¹ when His goodness withdrew her from this world where she had for many years so virtuously borne constant illness. We believe her to be

¹ Born in 1580, Mother de Bréchart could only have been fifty-seven when she died.



ST. JANE FRANCES FRÉMYOT DE CHANTAL
Foundress of the Order of the Visitation

Death

in the enjoyment of God, and hope she will help us by her prayers. Unceasingly and humbly we pray the Blessed Trinity to place in eternal glory this third daughter of the holy Institute.—Amen.

“SISTER JANE FRANCES FRÉMYOT.”

CHAPTER XXX

HER INCORRUPT BODY

AFTER death the body of Mother de Bréhard remained supple and her countenance singularly sweet and peaceful. The people of Riom flocked to the Convent to experience a wonderful perfume that since death had exhaled from the body. Amongst them were those who had themselves helped her to purchase her immortal crown through the sufferings she had had to endure from them on her arrival in Riom. But long since they had learnt somewhat to understand and appreciate the singular blessing God had bestowed upon them by her presence, and many were the hearts that now mourned her.

She died on the 18th of November, and was buried on the following day. Eight years later the Community moved into a new monastery they had built in the suburbs of Riom, and on May 23 of that year, 1645, took place the removal of the bodies in the sisters' cemetery from the old Convent to the new. Upon this occasion the gravediggers found one of the coffins so entirely rotten that they were obliged to place the corpse on a plank, and tying ropes round it they thus dragged it up and put it on the waggon containing the other coffins. As they drove through the town the little children ran after the vehicle and kept crying out, "They are taking away the Saint ! They are taking away

Her Incorrupt Body

the Saint." On arrival at the new Convent, it was plainly seen that the body was incorrupt, and the face of the good Mother de Bréhard was unmistakably recognised, while the hands were noticed to be quite white. During these eight years many miraculous cures had been effected through her intercession, so that her reputation for sanctity had spread throughout the whole province. And now finding her body incorrupt and still exhaling the sweet odour, his lordship the Bishop of Clermont was petitioned to allow an official examination of it. This took place in the Nuns' Choir before a large assembly of the petitioners. Amongst them was Mgr. de Maupas, Bishop of Puy. Upon the coffin being opened, all present experienced for a considerable time the sweet fragrance. The remains had not been embalmed, no perfumed herb, aromatic spices, or other artifice had been used, and yet when the body was raised or its posture changed to enable the surgeons more closely to examine it, with each movement it sent forth fresh and exquisite fragrance which all deemed supernatural. The surgeon made several incisions with his bistoury : when he raised the breast bone and removed the heart the odour was particularly powerful, and the heart was found to be bright red throughout of almost a natural hue. Upon further examination neither the flesh nor the fat of the body was changed, the latter being white as in life, the eyes were in the sockets as those of a living person, and the optic nerve was quite uninjured. When lanced blood came from the extremities of the fingers and stained the linen. In a word every part of the body, external and internal, was succulent, heavy, solid, and had lost none of its natural properties.

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Such is the official report drawn up by the Bishop of Puy and still happily preserved. This same Bishop was so struck by these marvellous events that many years afterwards he had the holy curiosity to examine a second time this wonderful miracle. The following is an abridgment of his report: "Being obliged to return to Riom last September, we found this same body of Mother de Brécharde intact; in a healthy state, and still exhaling a sweet perfume. We consider this all the more wonderful as after the application of the knife and the many incisions that were made by our order in the year 1645 we did not expect to find the body as we now see it to be."

Again in the following April he revisited the body and found it, he tells us, in almost the same condition as in his previous visits. "I cannot," he goes on to say, explain to myself to this hour the prodigious miracle of which we were witness, that the wood of the coffin, though dryer, more solid, and consequently less corruptible than flesh, was nevertheless reduced to dust, while the flesh of the Religious was in a state of marvellous integrity, victorious over death and over corruption. . . . [Then follow some pious reflections.] "Given at Puy, this twenty-ninth day of the month of May, the year one thousand six hundred and fifty-five."¹

After the examination of 1645 the body was placed in a shrine, standing upright against the wall in a little vault excavated under the choir grille. The sides of the shrine were of glass. In this place it remained supple, upright, incorrupt, and exhaling a sweet odour—the

¹ The original of this document is preserved in the departmental archives of Puy-de-Dôme.

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object of wonderful veneration, until the French Revolution desecrated it, as it desecrated so many other sacred shrines. The nuns have left us written records of this, and tell us that when they changed the little linen cap, as they did from time to time, on removing it from the head it was each time quite humid and marked with the natural grease such as comes from a living body. In October, 1708, another official examination was made at the sisters' request, and a report drawn up by the surgeon which ends thus: "The holy life persevered in to the end by the saintly Mother, and the present incorruptibility of her body, seem to prove that she is adorned in heaven with the incorruptible crown of glory which Our Lord so liberally confers on those who have lived stainlessly before Him. All the faithful who have been witness of the exhaustive examination which we have made of this body await with impatience the decision of our holy Father the Pope, to render to the remains the honours of the saints, if he judges it proper that she should be venerated as such."¹

Cures and other miraculous effects of her intercession now became frequent. Each translation of her body was signalised by some miraculous favour bestowed on one or other of the Riom sisters. The promise to visit the Church in which her body reposed, the simple appealing to her for assistance, sometimes wrought instantaneous cures. Her power with God was above all revealed in favour of the poor, those who in her youth at her own home she had so tenderly nursed and cared for, and the cure of bad eyes seems to have been a work of special

¹ Chaugy, "*Vies de Quatre des Premières Mères de l'Ordre de la Visitation de Sainte-Marie*," supplément, p. 242.

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predilection with her. Many persons who had almost lost their sight recovered the use of it through her intercession. All these marvellous happenings spread afar the reputation for sanctity of her whom the contemporary memoirs name by turns, "the Good Lady," "the Blessed Mother," and from all parts her beatification was called for. One has only to look through the circular letters of the Visitation Order of those times to see how many communions, prayers, vows, and sacrifices were offered to obtain "the beatification of our Venerable Mothers de Chantal and de Bréchart," for the Order united the glorification of these two great souls in one same hope. The two judicial inquiries were begun simultaneously: one at Annecy for Mother de Chantal, the other at Clermont for Mother de Bréchart, and both were sent together to Rome under the title "*Procès préparatoire des vertus et miracles, des vénérables Mères de Chantal et de Bréchart.*" But in Rome the desirability of bringing both causes forward simultaneously was discussed at a meeting presided over by Mgr. Lambertini, afterwards Pope Benedict XIV, with the result that the religious of the Visitation were advised to place first only the cause of the Venerable Mother de Chantal before the Holy See, and when she was canonised, then to bring forward the cause of the Venerable Mother de Bréchart, which in this way would be more surely and happily successful.

For one reason or another Mother de Bréchart's cause of beatification has never since been brought forward until last year (1922), during which it was a second time introduced. When the storm of the Revolution broke out her remains still reposed under the choir grille at

Her Incorrupt Body

Riom, where they had been placed nearly a century and a half before. During all these years her clothing had been renewed nine or ten times to satisfy the popular devotion, and each time the body was found incorrupt and exhaling a heavenly odour. Like many other Communities the Visitation of Riom took no measures of prudence in sight of the coming calamity, and in their precipitate flight they abandoned this, their greatest treasure. The municipality found it in its usual place still exhaling its wonderful odour, and either from a feeling of awe or of some secret terror lest God might punish them, they left the shrine untouched. But later some Republican soldiers who were quartered in the Convent went into the recess under the grille, and taking it down, carried it to the funeral vault. Then it pleased the Lord to end the miracle of incorruptibility, of which this precious body had so long been the object, and it went the way of all flesh.

Two old sisters of the Visitation of Riom were the first to attest to this fact. Entering the vault on February 16, 1805, they found the glass of the shrine broken; the body appeared still intact, but with the first contact of air the flesh fell away from the bones and left them bare. These two sisters immediately took possession of it, while other persons present appropriated some of the fragments.

On January 30, 1806, the head and the principal bones were sent to the Riom Community, which had established itself at Brioude, and in 1818 the sisters, returning once more to Riom, brought back the precious relics with them. In August, 1893, Mgr. Gannat, Vicar-General of Clermont, examined the holy remains, from which had

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been subtracted the lower jaw to give to the Monastery of Annecy. He authorised the sisters to keep them in a reliquary and place it in the choir. Several of the bones had previously, in 1805, been recovered and authenticated, and these, in 1888, were placed in the large shrine which contained the other bones. Here they remain to-day awaiting the decision of the Vicar of Christ to place Jeanne Charlotte de Bréchar d upon the altars of the Church, the announcement of which decision we hope for at no distant date, as the results of her cause of beatification, now before the Congregation of Rites, has been, so far, favourable.

CHAPTER XXXI

MOTHER MARIE FRANÇOISE DE MONTMORIN

A LIFE of Mother de Bréchar d would be incomplete without some mention of Mother Marie François de Montmorin. As the mantle of Elias fell on the shoulders of Eliseus so did that of Mother de Bréchar d fall upon this beloved disciple. From youth she had reared her in the path of perfection, and the character of the daughter became such a reflex of that of the Mother as to earn for her the title of "The Second Mother de Bréchar d."

To distinction of birth Marie François added the higher and rarer gift of distinction of virtue.

In 1613 the Marquise de Montmorin, during her pregnancy, visited Savoy. While there she had the happiness of making her confession several times to the holy Bishop of Geneva. More than once he blessed the unborn babe, and one day said to the Marquise: "Madame, if the child you bear is a girl I have asked God to give her to the Visitation Order." His prayer was heard and the child from her birth appears to have been a child of predilection.

To Madame de Montmorin's sister, Madame de Canillac, Abbess of the Abbey of Bonne-Sogne in Limousin, was intrusted the education of her nieces. At the age of four Marie François was clothed in the habit of this Order. Her beauty, her innocence, and

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the reverence with which the child regarded her habit charmed, says the old chronicle, all present at the ceremony. When her brothers blamed her for wearing this religious attire she was at no loss for an answer: "I love my veil and you your sword," she said; "with your sword you love your king and I with my veil," kissing it, "I love my God."

When she was ten years of age her aunt, the Abbess, was obliged to go to Paris. She took with her Marie's elder sister. During her absence it was customary in the Abbey for the nearest relative of the Abbess to take her place, and so the government fell on little Marie's shoulders. We can well believe that where such a custom was allowed to prevail some of the inmates would rejoice to find the government in the hands of a child with whom they could do as they liked. But God gave the infant ruler the wisdom of age. Her unexpected behaviour edified and created astonishment. When applied to by her subjects she would answer: "I am too young to speak for myself," and then, consulting the elders, she granted or denied the permissions sought of her according to their counsel. So did her capacity for government already show itself. On the Abbess's return the Marquise wished to have her youngest daughter home for a time, to which request Madame de Canillac, of course, acceded. Marie's father liked to have her with him, for she had a charm of manner and a well-endowed intellect. She was the goddaughter of the Duke of Savoy and of Marie de' Medici, and these royal personages showed a continuous interest in her, the Queen Mother destining her, when old enough, to be one of her Maids of Honour; so it does not surprise us to hear that her

Mother Marie Françoise de Montmorin

father had dreams of a great future for her. But God had other and greater designs for this child of prayer. After a little while the Abbess asked her sister to send back "the good angel of the house," as Marie was called in the Abbey. At first a deaf ear was turned to her appeal ; but later, fearing that she might be opposing the will of God, Madame de Montmorin allowed the child to return. The following year we hear of a second visit of the Abbess to Paris, and this time the plague broke out at Bonne-Sogne while she was away. Both girls were at once removed by their parents, and kept at home for some time. It was during this sojourn that God caused another step to be taken in the furtherance of His designs. The elder girl, who was to succeed her aunt in the abbatial dignity, aspired to a more regular life than that reigning in the Abbey. Mother de Bréhard's monastery was renowned for its strict observance of enclosure and of the Rule, and here Mademoiselle de Montmorin asked to be sent together with her sister. But Marie took exception to being included in this request. She was of an affectionate disposition and loved her aunt ; she feared, too, that she might not be able to resist Mother de Bréhard, the attraction of whose personality was well known. Yet notwithstanding her tears and her protests the elder girl won the day. Mother de Bréhard was a personal friend, and a very great one, of Madame de Montmorin, who now brought her two daughters to be for a time under her care. On arrival at Riom, Marie's sister was again the spokeswoman. She asked and received permission to enter the novitiate, that they both might practise the Rule in all its primitive fervour. Little by little Marie Françoise, who had

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entered with such repugnance, began to relish and love her new life. She had a great attraction to prayer and now applied herself seriously to it. Everything seemed to draw her to the Visitation : whereas her sister who had come to find a life of greater regularity, was frightened at the perfection required by the Constitutions. She found them more than she could undertake. Upon learning this, Marie reproached her : " You made me come," she said, " and now you want to go away. As for me, I feel God wishes me to serve Him in this Order, and here I will stay. I have found my vocation."

Meanwhile the Abbess wrote strongly to Madame de Montmorin saying that both girls should come back to her, whereupon the Marquise, who seems to have been very much under the influence of her sister, visited Mother de Brécharde and, expressing her regret, frankly, owned that she could not resist the Abbess de Bonne-Sogne, who had been educating them, and she must withdraw both children. The elder returned most willingly to the Abbey, and later succeeded her Aunt as Abbess, whereupon, reforming her monastery, she restored it to strict observance. But Marie showed great firmness and refused to leave the Visitation. She besought her Mother not to oppose her, for she felt God called her to be a Daughter of Holy Mary. After many arguments on the part of mother and daughter the former gave way. The remembrance of her visit to Savoy and St. Francis's prayer made her see in her daughter's firmness the accomplishment of the Saint's petition to God, and she felt that she dared no longer resist.

Hardly had the young girl begun her novitiate when

Mother Marie Françoise de Montmorin

M. l'Official arrived with an order from the Bishop of Clermont, enjoining the Superior of Riom to deliver up Mademoiselle Marie Françoise de Montmorin to the chaplain of the Abbess of Bonne-Sogne, who, accompanied by two ladies, had come in a carriage to fetch her. The poor child, completely overwrought, threw herself at the feet of Mother de Bréhard and besought her not to send her away. Mother-Mistress¹ and daughter wept together, for it would have taken a harder heart than that of Mother Jeanne Charlotte to remain unmoved at such a moment. She wrote at once to the Bishop begging of him to reconsider his decision in view of Mademoiselle de Montmorin's own wishes. The ladies who had been sent to induce her to return with them did their work of persuasion conscientiously, making the most of Marie de' Medici's interest in her, her aunt's affection for her, and the brilliant future she had every prospect of attaining. But still higher aims were in the soul of Marie Françoise, and nothing they said could shake her resolve. She wrote a letter to her aunt, so judicious, clear, and decided, that it settled for ever the question of her vocation. Having won the victory, she gave it not a further thought, and turned her whole attention to fitting herself to be a true Daughter of Holy Mary. The trials of her novitiate were not few nor light, but they were such as to lay a good foundation of humility, mortification, and self-surrender. However severely she was tested, far from abating her enthusiasm, it seemed but to kindle it.

In 1628 Saint Chantal visited Riom. When there she

¹ Mother de Bréhard was Mistress of Novices as well as Superior at this time.

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met her old friend Madame de Montmorin and thanked her most gratefully for giving her daughter to Riom. It was, she said, a gift that could not be over-estimated because she would some day be one of the great subjects of the Order.

On receiving the habit Marie Françoise placed herself as a victim in the hands of Mother de Bréhard, who offered to God the sacrifice of this upright and innocent soul. Not long after her clothing she was grievously afflicted by interior trials which she could not elucidate for herself, much less for another; yet a fear took possession of her lest she had not explained these inward struggles quite openly and simply to her Mistress. When an upright soul is suffering from this dark night she is apt to reproach herself for the incapacity that God has for the time laid upon her. While in this sad state her Mistress one day met Marie and asked her the cause of her dejected looks; the novice accused herself of having lacked simplicity and candour in speaking to her. Now whether the good Mother, like the Divine Master with the woman of Canaan, saw the greatness of the soul with which she had to deal and tested it accordingly we know not. Or, perchance, the caustic spirit in her, which to the eye of others seemed long years ago to have been completely vanquished, was not yet so annihilated that she did not, at rare intervals, fail in the gentleness of speech and manner to which she had trained herself, and for which she was now remarkable. From whatever cause, she turned upon her novice with a severe countenance and in a dry tone said: "Leave this house, my sister; I thought I had a dove in my nest and I find a serpent." The Divine Master had compared the Canaanite

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to a dog, a name of the greatest opprobrium amongst the Jews, and this blow to a straight, simple mind was not less hard ; yet the brave girl bore it with gentleness and humility, though the heart within must have been sore as was hers who spoke the bitter words. But the manner in which the humiliation was accepted made her Mistress at once realise (if, indeed, such were needed) that what Sister Marie had just said to her was but the outcome of perplexity and self-accusing innocence.

Mother Jeanne Charlotte then spoke words of such sweet comfort that God permitted them to be the means of driving the cruel temptation afar, and peace and tranquillity—nay, even a great joy—took its place in the heart of the novice. From this time she made great strides in the road of perfection. Fervour, mortification, and contempt of the world seemed to possess her soul more and more. She so transformed herself and so cultivated the virtues of humility and simplicity that a certain high-bred air for which she had been distinguished was replaced by these lowly virtues until they sat upon her with all the grace of the old distinguished half-haughty bearing. There was no menial work for which she did not volunteer, and she accomplished it with alacrity and thoroughness. Accused of things of which she was not guilty, she performed the penance of the pseudo-fault cheerfully, for, as she told her Mistress, in doing so God strengthened her inwardly and flooded her soul with consolations. Recalling her noviceship in later days, “Nothing,” she said, “is comparable to that first fervour. We felt all on fire, and we had no other emulation amongst us than that of being the most humble and the most faithful to the Rule. She who was found worthy

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of being humiliated was looked upon as the winner of the prize."

Upon her profession Sister de Montmorin renewed her offering of herself as a victim set apart from all things of this world and pledged to a life unknown and hidden in God. The day after her profession she was named porteress. In this and her future employments Mother de Bréchart wished herself to initiate her. As porteress she taught her to make recollection her chief aim—a recollection that should never be dried up or lessened by her relations with her neighbour—to let her modesty appear before all men, to let wisdom and prudence grace all her words ; and never to seek dispensation from the full observance of the Constitutions. Imprinting these lessons upon her heart, the young professed was soon regarded by her sisters as a living Rule. The following year she was given the charge of the linen. While in this charge it happened one day (not, as far as we can gather, a very infrequent occurrence) that there was neither food nor money in the house to provide the day's dinner. Sister Marie Françoise in the course of that morning was taking something from an old chest in the linen-room when she perceived a packet stuck in between the lining of the box and the wood ; on pulling it out she found it contained twenty-five crowns. At first she thought it must be something uncanny and did not dare to touch it until she had made the sign of the Cross, then she took it straightway to her Superior, and could not, the old chronicle tells us, impart her secret on the way because it was silence time. The Superior looked upon the money as a gift from God, and penetrated with gratitude she at once applied it to the needs of the Community.

Mother Marie Françoise de Montmorin

Six months later Sister de Montmorin was made burser. In this charge her remarkable talent for business soon made itself felt. Not only was the house in extreme poverty at the time, but it was burdened with a law-suit. The lawyers employed in this case were so struck by the ability of the young burser¹ that they gave it as their opinion that she must have studied law. She was next made infirmarian. Here we find her passing fifteen nights without going to bed. Truly might she have profited by the letter Mother de Bréchart received on an occasion of like excess from St. Francis.² The sick loved her, as well they might. In 1634 St. Chantal sent Sister Françoise Emmanuelle de Noverry to Riom for the consolation of Mother Jeanne Charlotte, who, upon her arrival, made her Mistress of Novices. The novitiate being small it was suggested that five or six of the young professed should return to it. Sister Marie Françoise at once begged to be of the number. Her petition granted she passed six months in this school of mortification. She was then elected Assistant to the Community. Next we hear of her as Mistress of Novices. Loved and respected by the novices, she filled this charge to the satisfaction of the Sisters and of her Superior. Mother de Bréchart was now once more Sister Deposée. Her infirmities were daily increasing and it was plainly seen that her end was near. Mother Jeanne Marguérite Chahu, who had succeeded her in office, being anxious to secure every consolation and skill in nursing for the venerated Mother, appointed Sister de Montmorin infirmarian. Deeply touched by this mark of confidence,

¹ She was at this time seventeen years of age.

² See chap. ix, p. 64.

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she entered on her charge with a full sense of her responsibility. She tells us that she never approached the bedside of the Mother, than whom she loved none better on earth, without a feeling of devotion and of reverence for her marvellous patience. From this great exemplar of virtue she learnt that endurance which before her own death she had so much occasion to practise. She treasured the words of life that fell from the lips of one who sought God alone and occupied herself with God alone. But when the end came, overwrought with sorrow and fatigue, she was unable to render her patient the last services. During those days of enforced separation Mother Jeanne Charlotte would send the other sisters to visit her beloved disciple. And on the day of her death she said to the Community gathered round her bed, "I beg of you take care of Sister Marie Françoise. You think of every device to relieve me and no one thinks of that poor child." Under this blow Sister Marie Françoise sank completely for the time. Nothing seemed to console her for her irreparable loss, for not only had she loved the good Mother dearly but she had drawn from her the primitive spirit of the Institute. After her death her infirmarian received visible succour and very special graces, but at the moment of it God allowed her to experience all the weakness of her nature. Mother Chahu now left no stone unturned to relieve Sister de Montmorin in her suffering state. On her recovery she appears to have again gone the round of the charges of the house¹ and with equal satisfaction to all, but for

¹ Both Mother de Bréchart and Mother Chahu appear to have frequently changed the charges of the sisters, no doubt in order to inculcate that spirit of detachment from all things, so often recom-

Mother Marie Françoise de Montmorin

some years she had been suffering from asthma, which, though at times alleviated, never wholly left her. In 1642 the Riom Community elected Sister Marie Philiberte-Aisement, professed of Lyons, as Superior, and Sister de Montmorin was sent to St. Etienne-en-Forez to fetch her. Soon after her arrival this Mother entrusted the supervision of the new monastery, which was abuilding, to Sister Marie Françoise, and the labours and fatigue she underwent during the translation of the Community from the old to the new Convent again broke down her health.

It was on this occasion that the remains of Mother de Bréhard on being conveyed to the new cemetery were found to be incorrupt, an account of which was given in the preceding chapter. But we will mention here that Mother Aisement, coming as a stranger to Riom and not having had the privilege of a personal acquaintance with Mother de Bréhard, placed no faith in the accounts she heard of the many miracles wrought through her intercession, and disregarding the wishes of the Community, had her remains reburied with those of the other deceased sisters. Not until God permitted the saintly Mother to appear to her one night in vision and bid her remove her body did she yield to the wishes of the Community. With the exception of this one fact Mother Marie Philiberte never revealed what passed that night. But next morning at four o'clock she sent an express messenger to the Bishop and also to the spiritual father. And on meeting the members of her Community she appeared in a state of great agitation. She told the sisters that Mother de Bréhard

mended by the holy Founders. See "Spirit of St. Chantal, as shown by the Letters."—(Longmans, London, 1922, p. 98.)

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had wrought in her a greater miracle than if she had given a new arm to Sister M. Louise Michelarne [a sister who had lost her arm]. These words she repeated later before an assembly of prelates. With now a firm faith in the efficacy of appealing to Mother de Bréchart she did so in behalf of Sister Marie Françoise, whose illness had become so grave that the doctors held out no hope of recovery. Not unmindful of her beloved spiritual child, Mother Jeanne Charlotte appeared to her, reproached her for her want of trust in her, and cured her.

Subsequent to this cure, probably upon hearing of it, the Marquis de Coligny entrusted to Sister de Montmorin his two sisters-in-law who wished to become nuns. But the Marquise de Coligny, who was very young, soon felt so lonely at being deprived of their society that she begged of her husband to found a monastery at their own place, Bourbon-Lancy, so that she might have her sisters near her. The Marquis and the Bishop of Clermont favoured the suggestion and arranged all preliminaries for the new house. This was done irrespective of Mother Marie Philiberte, who appears to have known nothing of it, and no doubt Sister Marie Françoise was kept in equal ignorance. Six sisters were considered necessary for the new Foundation. So having settled all things to their mind the Marquis called upon Mother Philiberte, informed her of their plan, and asked that his two sisters-in-law, Sister de Monmorin, and three others should be given for the Bourbon-Lancy Foundation. Mother Marie Philiberte was by no means inclined to agree to Sister Marie Françoise being included in the Foundresses, so she refused to allow her to go. Whereupon a dispute ensued, neither party yielding. In the summary fashion

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of the day the Marquis threatened to break down the enclosure door or else to abandon the enterprise altogether. Parleying in words was not in his line, and in the end the Mother Superior had to give way before his warlike style of negotiation. So Sister Marie Françoise became one of the foundation stones of the new monastery.

CHAPTER XXXII

FOUNDATION OF BOURBON-LANCY

ON arrival at Bourbon-Lancy the sisters foundresses were not received with any great enthusiasm, and had to suffer endless privations. The Marquis de Coligny for many months provided them with flour and wine, but apart from this they seem to have lacked every necessary convenience. The good people of Bourbon in their simplicity thought that Religious with two or three rooms, of such limited dimensions that they could hardly turn round in them, were splendidly lodged. The results can be imagined! At the end of three years Sister de Mortmorin was elected Superior. Mgr. d'Attichy had just succeeded Mgr. de la Madeleine de Ragny in the See of Autun. Unlike his predecessor, who was a fast friend and protector of all the Visitation Convents in his diocese, Mgr. d'Attichy considered that religious houses were multiplying too rapidly, and that for this particular monastery the close vicinity of the Baths would prove a stumbling-block to regularity of observance, and a pretext for the sisters to break enclosure in order to take these remedies. He resolved therefore to suppress the new Foundation.

As in the case of her great prototype, Mother de Brécharde, the royal ensign of the Cross thus heralded the spiritual Motherhood of Marie Françoise de Montmorin.

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The Marquis de Coligny was dead, and seeing no means of opposing the Bishop of Autun, the new Mother prepared to leave ; but she was by no means prepared to dissolve her Community ; that she proposed to establish in some other town. God had given it into her hands and she would not let His work be unproductive.

It needed all the skill and management of this good shepherdess to maintain the respect due to her Bishop and at the same time keep her flock intact. Setting the sisters to prayer and to penance she wrote to Mgr. d'Attichy. Wording her letter with care and precision, she told him that she would obey him in everything when she had learnt from himself his reasons for suppressing her monastery, and when she had given him her reasons for not wishing it to be suppressed. His lordship could not refuse this request, but it bore no fruit. He was determined the Community should go. The only mitigation she succeeded in procuring was a respite of three months before his commands became operative ; during which time she hoped to find a home elsewhere for her daughters.

Fourteen towns were in turn applied to. At the first overtures all appeared desirous to have the sisters, but soon in every single case, from one cause or another, insurmountable obstacles hindered their final acceptance. No doubt the extreme poverty of the Community would have checked the enthusiasm of most local authorities. Just when the Mother's hopes were at the lowest ebb the Papal Nuncio arrived at Bourbon to take the waters, and a beneficent Providence arranged that Mgr. Neuchêze, the Bishop of Châlons, St. Chantal's nephew, should

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come at the same time. Both prelates paid their respects to the Mother Superior of the Visitation. She told them of her perplexity and asked their advice. They gave it as their opinion that Mgr. d'Attichy had no right so to act. They advised her to appeal against him at the next meeting of prelates, and promised her their support. This she did, but during the intervening three months this generous woman suffered more than we should like to set down here. Threats of excommunication, penances, reproaches for the poverty of her monastery, for her own youth, for the resistance she offered her bishop, were all meted out to her in turn by Mgr. d'Attichy. He made two journeys to Bourbon; one providentially just as Mother de Montmorin had received a letter from Mother de Chaugy mentioning the possibility of a translation of her house to Brignolles. This letter somewhat placated the Bishop. But she was called upon to bear a still more intimate form of suffering. Her own sisters, the Superiors of other Visitation Houses, had been turned against her by reports prejudicial to her conduct, for such were everywhere circulated. So it came about that those from whom she hoped and longed for sympathy and support now blamed her for the resolution she had taken not to disband her Community. It is, however, pleasant to be able to state that the greater number of Superiors of her Order gave her encouragement, notably those of Annecy and Moulins, who took an active part in helping her. Moulins was close to Bourbon, and Madame de Montmorency, now a professed sister of that house, was of great assistance to her.

At last the assembly of clergy of which the Nuncio

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had spoken was held at Paris, and Mgr. d'Attichy was called upon to give his reasons for having resolved to suppress a monastery of the Daughters of Holy Mary. It was represented to him that this house could do no harm, that an Institute still in its first fervour would not break enclosure to go to the Baths, whilst relaxed nuns, if they came, would have a Convent in which they could stay instead of going to secular houses, a thing most undesirable. The discussion ended by the Bishop of Autun yielding to arguments of which he saw the force. On his return he visited Mother Marie Françoise, withdrew his opposition, and had the graciousness to thank her for not having given up hopes that he would eventually change his opinion. From this time he protected the monastery and showed it both affection and esteem.

But it needed some time yet to undo all the prejudices created against it. The Bishop's past prohibition to receive subjects, the gossip about the uncertain future of the house, its extreme poverty, the debts that were known to burden it ; all created an atmosphere of depression in the minds of the people, and parents fought shy of allowing their daughters to face such accumulated worldly disadvantages. Three years passed thus. Mother de Montmorin, quite undaunted, with faith that never wavered, never flinched, during this dark night of affliction, kept her shoulder to the wheel, not merely in a negative way to save her house from running down the hill of disaster upon which, in the world's opinion, it seemed to be set, but with energy and forethought she laid hold of each vantage point, however slight, that presented itself ; and now as the first term of her Superiorship

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was about to end she looked around for some soul, strong in faith and single in aim, who would take the place that she, in her own eyes, so ineffectively filled: someone whose experience and virtue would carry this house of God triumphantly through the breach. Her choice fell upon her old friend and counsellor, now very advanced in years, Mother Marie Hélène de Chastellux, who was about to be released from her charge of government at the Monastery of Charolles. An earnest appeal, strongly supported as it was by Mgr. d'Attichy, induced Mother de Chastellux to relinquish the repose for which she had been yearning and to take again for three years the burden of Superiorship. Not long after her arrival at Riom the new Mother wrote to Mgr. d'Attichy to assure him how untrue were the reports against this house. From personal experience she now gave testimony to the virtue of the Community and above all to that of Sister Deposée.

Upon Mother de Chastellux's deposition Sister Marie Françoise was again elected. Of her government we are told she maintained the observance of the Rule in all its vigour, her zeal was firm but temperate, her support kind without softness. She had a great dislike to particular friendships: "Nothing," she used to say, "is so prejudicial to charity and general union." Absence from choir was insupportable to her, and faults committed at the Holy Office she severely reprimanded, giving penances to the delinquents, more especially if the sisters who committed them were young in religion. On such occasions she was not sparing of strong words, yet never did her scoldings lessen the sister's confidence in her. While she ruled God seems to have watched in

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a special way over the house. Several times she was given money in a most unexpected way and sums were entrusted to her keeping with the permission to make use of them for the Community. Upon one occasion of note a certain M. Burgat, Bailiff of the Bailiwick of Bourbon-Lancy, a great benefactor to the Community, handed her a sealed document giving her no information as to its contents. He begged her never to unseal it, but when he died to give it into the hands of the Lieutenant-General and Procurator of the King. At the same time he asked her to mention to no one that he had done this. Four years later he fell ill. As he had no children, and was very wealthy, many people hoped that he would leave them something and urged him to make a will. He always replied, "My last wishes will be known at the right time." He died of this illness. After his death eager search was made, but no will could be found. At last it was thought that perhaps the Visitation nuns might know of some paper, so his relatives called upon Mother de Montmorin. On visiting her they made use of a little strategy, so that in case she had the will, it might, by her failure in some formality, be rendered null. But the good Mother was too clever and business-like to be taken off her guard. She delivered the document, according to the directions of the deceased, unopened into the hands of the Lieutenant-General and Procurator of the King. The relatives of M. Burgat were called together and the Lieutenant-General opened the document in their presence. Great was their astonishment and indignation to learn that M. Burgat had made the Community of Bourbon his sole heirs. The disappointed relatives took an action

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against the monastery, during which, it was said, no one would have suspected that they were at law with Mother de Montmorin, such was the courtesy of her behaviour towards them. God took care of her cause, she not only gained the law-suit, but the costs were likewise awarded to her. Worthy of her training under Mother de Bréchar, she returned good for evil. Not only did she pay all the legal expenses of the suitors, but gave considerable sums of money to some members of the deceased benefactor's family. This inheritance enabled her to realise her wish to lodge the Community in a fitting manner, and a suitable Convent was now built.

Her term of government once more ended, she became bursar under Mother Madeleine Angélique Boulier, and completed the building of the monastery before her own re-election. When this took place her first care was to erect a church, as worthy a memorial as she could make it of her Divine Master. Her love of Him all her life embraced a loving devotion to His Poor. Her forethought for them, her charity in sharing with them the provisions of the house, even when most limited, endeared her to them.

The bashful Poor, the sick Poor, the vagrant Poor, one and all seemed to have their peculiar claim on her, and even the idiosyncrasies of each were considered in her manner of bestowing alms. At periods during her life calumnies without end were her portion, yet she took no notice of them unless they included some reflection or untruth about her Community, then she defended it and protected it with all the courage and love of a mother. She had a heart without bitterness and without guile, but not without susceptibility, for she

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felt keenly the good and the ill that was done her, and of the latter she had her full share. The mantle of Mother de Bréhard, when it fell on the shoulders of this holy woman, proved no sinecure. During her time of deposition, under a Superior whose name is not handed down to us, no doubt from motives of charity, she was the continual subject of undeserved censure. Public corrections and penances were imposed upon her for private faults of which she was entirely innocent. On such occasions she bore herself with great sweetness and humility. No provocation, however unjust, succeeded in making her fail in the submission and respect due to her Superior ; on the contrary, she redoubled her assiduity and foresight to help in every way to lighten this Mother's burden, and most pleasantly and willingly gave advice when it was asked of her.

She had received the gifts of fear of God and of piety to a very remarkable degree. Not only did she avoid the least appearance of sin, but when she saw God offended tears would well up in her eyes and flow down her cheeks ; and this even for a simple failing in the observance, so intense was her realisation of the loyalty to God demanded of a Religious. For more than thirty years before her death a custom prevailed in the monastery which she had introduced, of obtaining from the relatives of each sister upon her taking the habit a set of clothing for a poor child at the following Christmas, in honour of the Divine Infant.

The last time she was Superior at Bourbon, having learned of a sacrilege committed against the Blessed Sacrament, she made the whole Community perform severe penances in reparation. Endowed with all the advantages that inspire

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vanity, she guarded against the least taint of it in herself with horror. For twenty years before her death she had suffered from a continual disrelish for food.

Such are some of the virtues and sufferings related of Mother Marie Françoise de Montmorin by her biographer.

CHAPTER XXXIII

RETURN OF MOTHER DE MONTMORIN TO RIOM

THE sisters of Riom had allowed Mother de Montmorin to spend the greater part of her religious life at the monastery of Bourbon-Lancy, which during twenty-seven years she had at intervals governed. Often as they longed for her return they felt it would be truer charity not to recall her. For during the many years of poverty and affliction at Bourbon her presence was essential, and when better times came, remembering the words of Job : "In prosperity the spoiler shall come upon him,"¹ they still refrained from summoning her home. At last, after an absence of forty-one years, the house of her profession claimed her. They sent an express to Bourbon to inquire if the infirmities and great age of the Venerable Sister Déposée would permit of her exercising the charge of Superior ; for as to her mind and judgment it was well known and clearly to be seen that they were unimpaired. So her old Community elected her amidst great and just rejoicing. Two former Superiors were sent to Bourbon to fetch her home. On their arrival they had to encounter much opposition both without and within the monastery. The sisters who were losing her were inconsolable, for she was the very heart and soul of their Convent. However, her own prudence and firmness

¹ Job xv, 21.

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overcame all obstacles both with the laity and the religious. God had manifested His will by the election of Riom, and to Riom she would go despite her seventy-five years.

Believing to see again Mother de Bréchart in this, her faithful disciple, she was received at Riom in a spirit of gratitude and reverence. The younger members had heard so much about her that they looked forward to having amongst them a living exemplar of ideal virtue ; but, they tell us, when she came the reality eclipsed their expectation. It was a beautiful sight to see this venerable Mother at the head of her Community, of whom she asked nothing that she did not herself first practise. Her regularity, her encouraging help, her fidelity to the observance, were a sustaining power to her daughters. To obey her, they say, was such a pleasure that they had to be on their guard to purify their intention or they could not have hoped for any merit therefrom ; for every soul tasted the peace, union, sweetness, and efficacy of her government.

Her charity for the sick was such as should be expected from that great motherly heart of hers. Upon one occasion everyone in the Convent fell ill of dysentery, only three escaping, of whom the Mother was one, and she with the two others nursed all the invalids safely through this illness, to the admiration of the doctor and the whole town.

On taking up her charge Mother Marie Françoise found the house of Riom in great financial difficulties. The sum of sixteen thousand livres for amortisation had to be paid, and there was not a sou—nor the prospect of a sou—to meet it. There were no novices, no boarders, and so it was a particularly scant year. Anyone else

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would have sunk under such a burden ; but her vigilance and courage were equal to it. She taxed all her ingenuity that the Community might feel the pinch of poverty as little as possible, and she insisted upon the best wheaten bread being provided for it. Fourteen years had elapsed without receiving a new member ; it was, therefore, essential for the life of the Community that subjects should join it. To obtain this favour from God Mother Marie Françoise proposed, with the approval of the Chapter, to make a vow to receive a postulant with no dowry. It is inspiring to hear how acceptable to God was this act of generosity—foolhardy the world would have called it ; not so her Divine Master. In a very short time there were nine postulants in the novitiate, and so many subjects continued to present themselves that the monastery was not large enough to accommodate all, and some had to go elsewhere.

The whole Institute regarded this Mother as a light of Israel, and her counsel was sought by many of its Superiors. On the completion of her six years' government, a golden age for her Community, she turned her thoughts to preparing for her final voyage to eternity. She had attained her eighty-first year ; but she was still to live seven long years, during which she truly verified the words of the Psalmist : *But if in the strong they be four score years what is more of them is labour and sorrow.*¹

The thought of God's great mercies and graces throughout her life and her own ingratitude bred in her such a realisation, such a vivid apprehension of the justice of the divine judgment, that the fear lest damnation should be her lot took possession of her. Sometimes she would

¹ Psalm lxxxix. 10.

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say : " I have always loved God, but I have never served Him." And again, in more desponding mood, " I have never loved God," and looking up to heaven in tender, touching tones she would say, " Ah ! Beauty ever ancient, ever new, too late have I loved Thee." More than one distinguished authority versed in matters spiritual, whom she consulted in her anguish, failed to comfort her. Expressing their admiration for the sanctity of this great soul they counselled her Superior to leave her in her suffering dispositions ; for, as they said, " It is the way of the Saints."

For thirty-three days before the end she passed through an accentuated mental and physical agony, retaining all the while her lucid presence of mind. The account of this last illness, with its great bodily sufferings and fear of God's judgments, is painful reading. A pathos hangs about it as it is portrayed by her biographer : her devoted daughters seeking, now one, now another, to relieve her intense suffering, the infirmarian's efforts, for the most part futile, to assuage her pain ; ever and anon speaking herself : " My life," she says, " has been but a breath of wind, and I blush with shame to appear before God my hands empty of good works." Upon this a sister suggests : " But was not all you did done for God ?" and then hesitatingly ventures to add, " You had some zeal for the observance, does not that comfort you ?" " It is true," she replies, " that I thought to have done some good, but self-love has spoilt it all. I am like the bishop in the Apocalypse,¹

¹ " Know thy works that thou hast the name of being alive and thou art dead . . . for I find not thy works full before my God."—Apocalypse iii, 1, 2.

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whose works, although good, counted for nothing before God." Heaving a deep sigh she continues: "Alas! no sorrow is to be compared to that of a soul who sees herself about to appear before her God." And again: "I hope in the mercy of God, who can pardon more than I can sin. It consoles me in my pains to remember that our blessed Mother de Bréhard had similar sufferings before her death,¹ and she promised to help me. I often recite some verses she made for herself in her own troubles, they give me comfort." Then the dying sister repeated with all the fervour of perfect health thrice over:

"Si mes péchés sont un puissant obstacle
Pour m'empêcher d'aller à vous ;
Vous pouvez bien, sans fair de miracle,
Me purifier par un bain plus doux,
C'est votre sang, O Sauveur de mon âme !
Dont le mérite est infini ;
Il n'y a cœur si difforme et infâme,
Qu'il ne rende net et poli,
Hélas sors donc, mon âme, je te prie,
Sors de ce vallon de malheur ;
Va te jeter dans le sein de Marie
Pour être offerte à ton divin Sauveur."

Again the awful fear of judgment returns ; the Convent Confessor suggests every reassuring thought of God's mercy to her terrified soul, till calmed by his words of hope and trust in God the temptation leaves her to return no more. In all the terrible struggle of this death-bed she who lay upon it forgot no one. Many tender messages were sent to her children at Bourbon,

¹ These sufferings of Mother de Bréhard apparently passed away some months before God took her to Himself, for the key-note of her death, as we have seen, was joy and intense longing to be dissolved and be with Christ.

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whom she begged to forgive her for all the scandal she had given them.

The day before her death she answered all the Church's prayers for the departing soul and appeared wholly occupied in God. Next morning she became unconscious but soon regained consciousness. Towards evening, about five o'clock—it was the Feast of the Epiphany 1702—she said in a faltering voice, "My God, have pity on me!" and then: "Jesus." In a few moments her soul was in the hands of her Creator.

She was eighty-eight years of age, and had been professed seventy-two years. The people of Riom mourned her as, more than half a century before, they had mourned the first Mother de Bréchart, and while contemplating the countenance of her whom they called the second of that revered name, and saw the calm beauty that came upon it after death they said one to another, "She, too, will work miracles."

Before her death Mother Marie Françoise de Montmorin placed in the hands of her Superior all her worldly possessions. They consisted of three books—the "Imitation of Christ," the "Introduction to a Devout Life," and a small manuscript book of the instructions of Mother de Bréchart written by herself.

The secret of her life had been that she possessed a passionate love for God. Whatever fed it she welcomed, whatever did not help to kindle it she disregarded.¹

¹ For further details of the life of Mother de Montmorin see "Année Sainte, Vol. I, pp. 115 *seqq.*

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE SPIRIT OF THE VISITATION¹

WE are often asked what the Visitation does. How do you spend your life? You have but few bodily austerities, no active work. How can you justify your existence? How do you help mankind? We cannot more fittingly close this monograph of the early days of the Visitation Order than by giving an epitome of its spirit in answer to these very reasonable inquiries.

The Visitation is a form of contemplative life which can be led by people of ordinary capacity and ordinary health. The Life of Nazareth has always been the model upon which the Visitandine is taught to mould her life. A life of seclusion from the world, and yet essentially within the Convent walls a common life. A life with no outward singularity of bearing or of practice such as may attract the esteem of men. A life of homely domestic labour. A life wherein the subject carries out with childlike simplicity and reverence the task allotted her by obedience. Making no reflections, drawing no conclusions about means or ends, her mind is left unhampered in its quest for that clear perception of the unseen, that spiritual discernment which is correlative with the virtue of simplicity she is striving to acquire. Secure from the

¹ For more detailed information on the Spirit and Life of the Visitation Order see list of recent publications at the end of this volume (pp. 255-6).

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excitement and the anxieties of the world she gains quiet, which, St. Basil says, "is the first step to sanctification, for in quiet the mind falls back upon itself and thence ascends to the contemplation of God." Heaven, she feels, is somewhere hard-by, to be come at when she has made herself ready by acquiring the specific spirit of her Order, and sanctifying herself by the specific form of penance that belongs to her vocation.

In the inculcation of this spirit St. Francis uses strong and forcible language. The word *annihilation* cannot, in our vernacular, present itself to the mind without qualifications, but speaking in a spiritual sense, so far as it can be true of any form of self-effacement, it is true of the special form of mortification which St. Francis demands of his daughters. He uses the word boldly regardless of any qualifications or restrictions because it is the very pivot upon which he has founded his Institute. His nun must disregard alike consolation and desolation. She must not seek raptures, elevations, nor ecstasies, such high experiences are not in accord with the spirit of lowliness with which her Order seeks to imbue its members, and are more proper to excite the admiration of others than to sanctify her heart. He would not have her use constraint with herself—all constraint displeases her Spouse, who loves the freedom of heart that gives itself to His service with entire liberty. But she must, as far as in her lies, strive to annihilate self by a most comprehensive form of effacement. And if she fail to labour towards this goal of complete renunciation of self, he tells her that she loses her pearl without price and is no longer a daughter of the Visitation. Gathering strength as he elucidates these points of vantage in the

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spiritual life, "Be it known to you," he continues, "that your Congregation will never rear aloft its branches nor bear fruit save in the measure in which its roots are planted in the love of lowliness and humiliations. But with roots so planted you will attain the truest and highest humility, and God, seeing in the depth of your heart this loving tendency, will establish you and perfect you in that manner of life to which He hath called you."

To quote further from "l'Esprit Intérieur,"¹ which is a compilation of the intimate sayings of St. Francis to his daughters: Their Institute, he tells them, is founded upon Mount Calvary, and every Visitandine should be a living holocaust (*hostie*), a perpetual victim of sacrifice. She should offer herself to God on the altar of Calvary, there unceasingly to serve Jesus Christ, her crucified Spouse . . . Her mind set upon one only desire, to penetrate the true significance of the divine lesson of self-renunciation, and the Cross always before her eyes she meditates upon its secrets and reproduces them in her life. This complete mortification is bitter to nature, yet, he tells her, to her it will be sweeter than is honey to the lips, for by it Christ and His love will reign in her heart and fill it with the most abundant peace. Speaking of the obedience he demands, St. Francis says, "Your obedience must be founded on a thorough abnegation of your own will. Renounce the assumed right of judging and deciding what is best for you. True obedience questions neither the precept nor the motive of the command. 'He knows not how to judge,' says St. Gregory, 'who knows well how to obey.' Perfect obedience

¹ "Abrégé de l'Esprit Intérieur," chap. i.

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needs no spur, no inducement, no law, nor command, it anticipates all such incentives by its submission to God, for sheer love of Him."

The obedience under which the Visitandine lives is such that there is not a moment of the day wherein she does not feel its bearing-rein. This continuous austerity, for such it proves in the working, aims at gradually, gently, and most effectually subduing her natural defects, so that her soul may become sensitive and supple to the breath of heavenly inspiration. St. Francis desired for his daughters not only the fair flower of charity, but the finest bloom thereon, and one of the means instituted by him for the attainment of this most lovable virtue was the constant intercourse of family life which is enjoined by the Rule of the Visitation more than by any other contemplative Order. Just as the daily exercise of his art is essential to the artist who wishes to excel, so with the like intent has St. Francis provided his Visitandine with the opportunities of cultivating this virtue of mutual charity even to the high degree he sets before her.

Addressing his daughters on the virtue of poverty, the holy Bishop says: "If you esteem poverty you should cultivate it. She who seeks her convenience, her pleasure, her consolation, her own will, cannot call herself poor because Jesus Christ has said: 'He who does not renounce all he possesses cannot be my disciple.'" Alluding to the inconveniences inevitable in the practice of this virtue he adds in his gentle but incisive way: "We do not complain of what we love." Commenting on the ways by which the Holy Spirit leads the Saints in the exercise of prayer, St. Francis says: "They are wonderful in their diversity, and should all be revered,

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as they all tend to God, and are under His guidance ; yet all are not for us, nor must we even make choice of any of ourselves. But it behoveth us to discern the grace conferred upon us [individually] and to be faithful to the attraction of the Holy Spirit." Then having touched upon the higher forms of prayer, by which God conducts some chosen souls, he passes on to that common among those whom he is addressing. "Long experience has taught me," he says, "that God calls almost all the daughters of the Visitation to the prayer of simple unity, a unique simplicity of attention to His presence, and absolute surrender of self into His hands." And again: "the more tranquil and simple your prayer is, the more fruitful it is : . . . the grace of prayer is not acquired by any effort of the mind, but by lowly and faithful perseverance."¹

Once more, indeed times out of number, he reiterates : "Humility is the characteristic virtue of the Visitation," and he bids the sisters never to forget that "all the glory of a daughter of the Visitation consists in having none, and all her greatness in keeping herself in lowliness : and that such complete self-effacement as is demanded by her vocation includes the highest perfection attainable upon earth.

Instructing the sisters on the virtue of charity, he says : "As heretics are heretics because they reject some article of Faith, and as Catholics are Catholics because they reject none, so is it with Charity. To make an act of true charity it must proceed from an unqualified universal love, otherwise the heart from which it proceeds cannot be truly loving nor truly good." And

¹ St. Chantal speaks similarly on this subject.

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treating of its effects he gives utterance to these beautiful thoughts : "Divine love subdues in obedience to itself every heart-string, every passion of the soul. It yields a contentment that not all the waters of tribulation nor the floods of persecution can extinguish ; yea, not only is it inextinguishable, but it waxes rich in poverty, it is glorified by abjections and humiliations, it rejoices amidst tears : when the justice it has claimed is denied it and fair play refused, it gains strength thereby, when surrounded by the miserable and the sorrowing it unbends its spirit in loving sympathy. It delights in the relinquishment of all sensual and earthly pleasures so that it may be pure and clean of heart. Its ambition is to pacify quarrels, to calm dissensions, to allay the bitterness of strife. It is invigorated by the endurance of sufferings, and maintains that its true life consists in dying [to itself] for Him whom it loves." ¹

Were we to quote one half of the similes made use of by our Saint to kindle enthusiasm in his hearers for the acquisition of his favourite virtues of humility and simplicity, we should tire the most indulgent reader. But one or two of his metaphors we cannot refrain from relating. Here is one : "There is a great difference," he says, "between the swallow's nest and that of the sunbird of Arabia. The swallow's nest is rudely constructed of mud, bracken, and rushes, the other is built on lofty branches of trees, and is made of canella bark, cinnamon wood, and other aromatic materials. Yet the swallow will not alter her poor little bed in any fashion whatever to make it like the rare and carefully wrought

¹ "Œuvres," Tome V ; "Traité de l'Amour de Dieu," Livre XI, chap. 19.

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swinging abode of the sunbird. She reposes more at ease in her contemptible little nest than if she were in the perfumed boudoir of the royal bird. Your Congregation, dearest daughters, is a swallow's nest ; it is framed on constitutions that are moderate and easily within your reach. Other Congregations have hard, high, sublime rules ; let them be, they are not for you, they are for the sunbird, that is, for more perfect souls. Reverence them, admire them, otherwise be content with the little God has given you, it is adequate for you. Rejoice in the abjection of it and thank His infinite goodness for having given it to you. So should you prefer these other Orders to your own in honour and esteem, but prefer your own to all others in love, as being more adapted to your qualifications. In a word, remember that in the Church of God the Sisters of Holy Mary are like the violet amongst the flowers—of little account, insignificant, and with no brilliancy of colour ; but planted there by the Divine Majesty for His service, and to give a little perfume to His Church.”¹

One other illustration of the Saint's method of impressing his lessons upon his spiritual children and we shall have done.

The necessary employments assigned to the sisters, he tells them, do not diminish divine love but increase it—in fact, put the gilt edge on their devotions—and then : “Just as the nightingale loves her melody no less when she makes her pauses than when she sings, so the heart in love is no less enamoured of her love when she turns to exterior duties than when she prays. Her silence and her

¹ “La Vie de St. François de Sales,” par le Père de la Rivière : Livre III, chap. 29.

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speech, her action and her contemplation, her employments and her repose are equally songsters in her heart singing the song of love.”¹

The following letter of advice, written by St. Francis to St. Chantal, is a synopsis of his spirit, and so it should find place here. It was transcribed by St. Chantal in her little copy of the Rules and Constitutions of the Visitation, which she always carried about her. This precious double relic is still preserved in the Monastery of the Visitation at Rennes :—

“I should like you to be insignificant and worthless in your own eyes, meek and compliant as the dove, to love your own abjection and cheerfully take advantage of every opportunity that presents itself of accepting it and making good use of it. Be reserved in speaking, slow to reply, and when replying let your answer be gentle and humble. Your silence, modesty, and moderation should say more than your speech. With meekness of heart generously support and excuse your neighbour. Do not philosophise about the contradictions that befall you nor let your mind rest thereon. But in every happening turn your thoughts to God, and acquiesce without demur in whatever He ordains. Do all things for God, continually keeping alive your union with Him by simply looking unto Him and letting your heart flow out to Him. Be not eager about anything. Let all be done in a spirit of restfulness and tranquillity, and let nothing ever rob you of your inward peace whatever the

¹ “Œuvres,” Tome V ; “Traité de l’Amour de Dieu,” Livre XII, chap. 5.

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upheaval, for nothing in this life can be compared to peace of soul. Confer with God about everything, keeping yourself the while tranquilly reposing on the bosom of His Fatherly Providence.

“Whatever may occur abide by the resolve to cling to God by a most simple union and with unique simplicity. Do this in the implicit trustfulness of love, surrendering yourself over to His merciful love and to the ever-watchful care of His divine Providence. Should your mind wander from His keeping call it back quite simply and gently. Divest it of all superfluities, and keep it so stript ; under no pretext whatever allowing yourself to be again encumbered by cares, desires, aims, or affections. Our Lord loves you and wishes you to be wholly His. Be carried in no other arms than His, repose on no other bosom than that of His divine Providence. Fix your mind upon Him alone, and put far from you all other thoughts. So intimately unite your will to His that yours and His become inseparably one. No longer ruminate over irrelevant things—forget them all, for God is jealous of your beauty and your singleness of purpose. Keep yourself in profound humility before the divine Majesty. Desire but one thing, to give Him the chaste love of your heart. However hard to relinquish, refuse Him nothing. Clothe yourself with our crucified Lord. Love Him amidst His sufferings, and make ejaculatory prayers to Him about them. Practise these things carefully, my very dear Mother, my true daughter. With all affection of mind and heart I bless you. May Jesus Christ accomplish His holy will for His own glory, in us, with us, and through us.—Amen.

“✠ F. E. DE GENÈVE.”

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These few extracts, drawn more or less haphazard from the writings of St. Francis, sometimes given in his own words and sometimes summarised for the sake of brevity, will, we hope, convey an idea of the spirit of strength in sweetness, of outward and inward despoliation, of complete renunciation of self, with which the Saint unwearingly sought to imbue his daughters, and by which he wished to characterise his Order.

By such means, by mental prayer, by the practice of continual attention to the Presence of God, and other daily devotional exercises, he hoped to fulfil the ends for which, in common with all Religious Orders, he established his : First and supremely, to give glory to God, to offer Him "the sacrifice of praise," and secondly, to help by a hidden life of prayer and penance, of inward activity, to frustrate the work of the Powers of darkness, of the Prince of this World in his warfare on the souls of men. "The hands that are raised to God," says Bossuet, "break through more battalions than those that strike."¹

¹ Oraison funèbre de Marie-Thérèse d'Autriche.

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- "The Life of Marie Catherine Putigny, Lay Sister of the Visitation Convent at Metz." From the French by a Sister of the same Order. College Press, Ilchester, Ma., U.S.A. 1903.
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